'Losing a Life to Find It' Ben Robertson, Jr.'s Freedom Quest

Beatrice Bailey

Clemson University, cbeatri@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation

Bailey, Beatrice, "Losing a Life to Find It' Ben Robertson, Jr.'s Freedom Quest" (2012). All Theses. 1544.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/1544

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
“LOSING A LIFE TO FIND IT”: BEN ROBERTSON, JR.’S FREEDOM QUEST

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Beatrice Naff Bailey
December 2012

Accepted by:
Dr. Paul Anderson, Committee Chair
Dr. Rod Andrew
Dr. Michael Silvestri
ABSTRACT

This thesis is a revisionist perspective on the life and legacy of Ben Robertson, Jr. Throughout the last seventy years, a few efforts have been made to assess Robertson’s significant contributions. For the most part, these have focused on his accomplishments as a southern author or journalist in the first half of the twentieth century. This thesis, in contrast, examines Robertson’s life trajectory in terms of his understanding of and commitment to American freedoms. It examines how Robertson, a young man from the upcountry of South Carolina, was able to become a leader in one of the most significant freedom struggles in world history. How in his forty years did he use his various gifts to encourage American freedoms within his state, country and beyond?
DEDICATION

I dedicate this initial investigation into the life and times of Ben Robertson, Jr. to the founders and future members of Clemson University’s Ben Robertson Society that was established in the spring of 2012.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I deeply appreciate Clemson University’s history department. Because of their program and guidance, I have begun to enter into conversations within the field. I especially want to thank my chair, Dr. Paul Anderson. He stuck with me through the years as I continued to reframe my understanding of Ben Robertson’s life and legacy. I also want to thank Dr. Rod Andrew. I hope to someday publish the work I started in his Southern biography seminar. Dr. Michael Silvestri, my other committee member, has helped me appreciate more fully Ben Robertson’s accomplishments as an international war correspondent during the Battle of the Britain and for that I am thankful. I am also indebted to Professor Alan Grub. Through our creative inquiry collaborations, we have helped launch Clemson’s Ben Robertson Society.

Finally, I want to thank my family. They have supported me in so many ways and have always known about my late father’s love of history. They know how so long ago we used to skid to an abrupt halt to read the gray historical markers as we traveled to historical sites.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: CULTIVATING STRENGTHS FOR FREEDOM’S SAKE</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: FORGING A FREEDOM THEME</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: FINDING FREEDOM UPON SHAKESPEARE’S CLIFF</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

As the press of the democratic world gathered upon Shakespeare’s Cliff in August of 1940, Ben Robertson, Jr. of South Carolina’s upcountry was there. Having volunteered as a U.S. war correspondent at the age of thirty-six, Robertson was covering the Battle of Britain for New York’s progressive PM. As Whitelaw Reid, Jr., his associate from the New York Herald Tribune, put it in a BBC/PBS documentary Finest Hour: The Battle of Britain, the battle for England was the biggest story since the birth of Jesus Christ.¹ Ben Robertson knew the profound significance of the event as well and was willing to risk his life to herald it as he shared in his eyewitness account I Saw England:

There never in the history of the world was such an August as that August at Dover. The Germans tried with raids in the daytime to smash England, and the British fought them and turned them back in the Kentish sky. Nothing happening anywhere else in the world could even approach those battles in importance. . .²

Contemporary public British historians have noted Ben Robertson’s revelation and his contributions as an eyewitness to the freedom struggle of the British people. The last chapter of Part One in their documentary Finest Hour: The Battle of Britain is devoted

¹ Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, Finest Hour: The Battle of Britain (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
² Ben Robertson, Jr., I Saw England (New York: Knopf Press), 86.
to the battles at Dover. The producers offer the voice of a Southern American as well as incredible, soulful footage of the Dover terrain, as the speaker recreates and utters Robertson’s statement of his understanding of the significance of the moment. Like Robertson, the producers, Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, saw the Battle of Britain as Churchill did. It was, indeed, Britain’s finest hour in world history.³

For Robertson, the beginning of the Battle of Britain was a global struggle of freedom versus tyranny, good versus evil, the dignity of every human being versus their utilitarian value for the powerful few. Robertson, like the progressive newspaper for which he was writing, did not like big people who liked to push little people around. The founder and managing editor of PM, Ralph Ingersoll, the man to whom Robertson would dedicate his I Saw England, made explicit his understanding of the global struggle and his paper’s general perspective on it:

The present conflict is not a conflict between isolation and intervention at all, but a total and world conflict between self-seeking men and men of good will. The real struggle is between men who think only of their own interests, and men who are really concerned with the welfare of other men. Not simply because it’s to their immediate advantage to think of others but because they believe in the dignity of man, and have faith in the destiny of mankind—and in their hearts, they love their fellow men. It is the totality of this conflict between the cynic and the believer that is gradually becoming apparent to everyone—in whatever terms it is defined . . .

³ Finest Hour, prod. and dir. Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, 120 min, BBC/PBS, 2000, DVD.
the various approaches to be found here are all fair or false starts to the same objective: a better world in which men may be free to make it still better. And this objective is never out of mind whether in discussions of air battles over the Channel, the future of collective bargaining in the United States, the defense of the western hemisphere or the expansion of the German Reich.4

As Ingersoll suggested in his Introduction to America Is Worth Fighting For, he and his PM staff wanted to protect the inalienable freedoms of everyday Americans and people throughout the world in a time when fascists were in the ascendancy. A passionate American patriot with a global sensibility, Robertson, in his moment upon Shakespeare’s Cliff, came to a much fuller understanding of his mission. He knew he could live out his days helping to defend and extend what he considered the unassailable freedoms of peoples throughout the world—no matter what the cost:

These were wonderful days in every way—they changed me as an individual. I lost my sense of personal fear because I saw that what happened to me did not matter. We counted as individuals only as we took our place in the procession of history. It was not we who counted, it was what we stood for. And I knew now for what I was standing—I was for freedom. It was as simple as that. I realized the good that often can come from death. We were where we were and we had what we had because a whole line of our people had been willing to die. I understood Valley Forge and

4 Ralph Ingersoll, America is Worth Fighting For (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 9-11. This hastily crafted position statement of the escalating world war summarizes the views and perspectives of the editor and staff of PM.
Gettysburg at Dover, and I found it lifted a tremendous weight off your spirit to find yourself willing to give up your life if you have to—I discovered Saint Matthew’s meaning about losing a life to find it. I don’t see now why I ever again should be afraid.5

In this brief passage, Robertson tried to define an ideal that meant more to him than his physical life. He was willing to fight for an ideal of human freedom because he felt that it was eternal and precious and could endure as long as it was honored within the minds of others as they worked together to make the ideal real within their ever-evolving covenant communities. Robertson certainly understood that forging a community free and brave was the work of generations, but he believed it was worth the fight and persistence.

As will be shared within this thesis, Robertson considered himself to be a part of a long, freedom tradition that had begun way before his ancestors arrived within the New World as he suggested when he wrote “we had what we had because a whole line of our people had been willing to die.” He believed he was a part of what historian Perry Miller was beginning to describe in Robertson’s day as the early colonial Puritans’ “errand into the wilderness.” Perry’s allusion is found within John Winthrop’s inaugural sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” that he offered as the brave English Puritans set sail to establish what Winthrop called “a city upon a hill” that would become as a light to all nations. According to Miller and others who have followed in his wake, their

5 Robertson, I Saw England, 93.
errand was to forge a spiritual home in the wilderness that would serve as model spiritual community, one that would enable its members to flourish together for generations in harmony and prosperity. As Miller also understood, the early Puritans fell way short in forging this enabling spiritual community although they made valiant efforts. Yet, historians continued to follow the leaders of the next generations of these idealistic Puritans as they found their ways far beyond the Massachusetts Bay covenant community and into pulpits, civic conversations and battles that would eventually lead to the construction of the American Republic that championed indisputable human freedoms and rights. These Puritan scions kept working toward the original errand, tweaking it as necessary; yet they, too, fell short. Additional intellectual historians such as Sacvan Bercovitch have continued to trace this one strain of American thought, this recurring idea or leitmotif of America’s errand into the wilderness, down through literary and intellectual history as it has manifested itself in public speeches such as Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and in the literary works of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. They have also found its expression within even later regional writings by authors such as Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett and in the speeches of civil rights activists and a few recent American Presidential addresses. Miller and his students have described these various texts as jeremiads. Jeremiads are stirring, persuasive arguments or secular sermons of sorts that are offered within a variety of genres and that are designed to encourage listeners or readers to reclaim their original American wilderness errand, to continue to work toward establishing covenant communities such as organizations or states or institutions that encourage humankind’s
greatest and freest moral and creative potential. Robertson considered himself a part of this rhetorical tradition. He wrote about communities near and far who were trying to craft richer covenant (or contractual) communities for the fullest and freest expression of human agency or genius.6

Upon Robertson’s return home to Fort Hill, South Carolina after covering the Battle of Britain from May to early December of 1940, he revealed his understanding of literary history and how texts can help readers change their ways of thinking and hence their ways of living and being. He spoke with aspiring writers at Clemson College, his alma mater, in February of 1941:

It took America a long time to be itself—we are just learning—many of us; we looked to England; nothing was good unless it was English. You find that in Pitcairn Island today where they talk about roses and violets and forget the native flowers on the island—they talk about roses and violets because Shakespeare and Shelley have shaped their thoughts. Nothing really exists until it is written down, until it is put in print. People accept the old until something new is written to take the place of the old. . . . [I]n writing we are against the words of the Victorians. We are trying to be more real. In America we owe more than we realize to Sarah Orne Jewett—read her stories of Maine. Then we owe a great deal to Sherwood Anderson—to one book *Winesburg, Ohio*. We can learn a great deal from Miss Willa Cather and Thomas Wolfe on one hand and from Hemingway and Steinbeck on the other—all are modern. And read Hawthorne again—he was far more modern and real than he knew. He represented the greatest theme in American literature, the great theme that is trying to express ourselves to ourselves—the great American theme that comes through Hawthorne and Emerson and Thoreau and Herman Melville to Thomas Wolfe—that is the great stream of American writing. And add to that Walt Whitman.”

Robertson believed that he could participate in this “errand into the wilderness” tradition by sharing written stories of communities throughout the world who were about the tasks of encouraging undeniable or for him God-given freedoms. Although

---

these excerpted “Talking Points” cited above were merely that and not published reflections, he seemed to suggest within them that the public in general tends to accept traditional ways of interacting until they consider alternatives through reading and reflection. This assertion will prove a key point within this entire thesis. Robertson believed that writers could offer texts that would help concerned readers think about their civil obligations and opportunities to work toward the common good by reading and thinking about communities who were working toward those ends. In a way, he believed that good journalists or authors who wrote for large public readerships could have this persuasive civic authority and influence. Evidence will be offered that suggests that Robertson himself truly had such authority and impact although he lived to be just shy of forty. *PM* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, for example, for whom Robertson worked could have chosen among the best reporters in the world as they worked to fulfill their civic, liberating missions by offering the reading public the breaking news. The premier publishing company of Alfred A. Knopf supported Robertson’s efforts as well. This press was well known for publishing authors who had important and timely insights to share with leading citizens. Reviews of his *I Saw England* also testify to his influence as will be shared. Furthermore, *Reader’s Digest* begged to have his *I Saw England* adapted for an even larger audience and made it happen within record time, still months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.8 Americans read his jeremiad, his call for his people to reclaim America’s original

---

8 Letter from *Reader’s Digest* Editor, March 1941, Ben Robertson Papers.
errand, to forge and protect communities far and near as they considered their responses to Hitler’s freedom assaults.

A review of Ben Robertson’s papers and published works within Clemson University’s Special Collections as well as other primary and secondary sources reveals that Ben Robertson knew himself well. He was passionately committed to a freedom ideal. People who were acquainted with him throughout much of his childhood and early career and who followed his efforts until his untimely death in 1943 have also attested to his freedom-loving ways. Robertson’s good friend from Charleston, Senator Burnet Maybank, helped publish a tribute upon Robertson’s passing within the U.S. Senate’s *Congressional Record*. He drew upon a previous one that had been published in Charleston’s *News and Courier* by another dear friend of Robertson’s, the newspaper’s editor, Tom Waring, Jr. Maybank and Waring saw Robertson as an unofficial American ambassador:

> In England, Ben Robertson was more than a reporter; he was an unofficial ambassador of America, a symbol of the courage, the good will, and the gallantry of the United States both before and after Pearl Harbor. He was on first-name basis with the mighty and the humble, and the people who knew him in foreign lands will love Americans the better for having met him.9

This excerpt illumines Robertson’s “good will” and international reach “in foreign lands.” These American leaders, the entire U.S. Senate, saw Robertson as someone who

9 A Tribute to Ben Robertson, Jr. in *U.S. Congressional Record*, 1943. Mss 77 Ben Robertson, Jr. Papers, Clemson University Special Collections. Referred to hereafter as Ben Robertson Papers.
was using his talents and spiritual gifts to build strengthening alliances not just within his state of South Carolina or within his country but throughout the world. Another key for appreciating Robertson’s understanding of America’s errand is that he believed America should be as a “light upon a hill,” that her representatives should be exemplars of good will and hope, that they should instill an undying hope for the possibilities of a WORLD brave and free, not just an America free and brave. Robertson was idealistic enough to believe in such an unlikely possibility. He had great faith in the liberating potential of the human spirit even though he confronted Hitlerian evil day in and day out during his last few years. He could, for example, readily embrace the ideals of the Four Freedoms that Roosevelt encouraged in his Congressional speech in January of 1941 and that Lady Roosevelt would later champion as she helped draft the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights in 1945, her “wilderness errand” document or jeremiad for sure. Robertson was in conversation with dedicated visionaries like the Roosevelts who believed the errand was worth working toward and could actually be realized through international diplomacy.

10Robertson alluded to the Four Freedoms in his last published article for PM in 1943 when he used them to call into question Great Britain’s human rights violations in India. See Ben Robertson, “British Colonial Imperialism and Four Freedoms Clash in India; United Nations Are the Losers: You Can’t Rule a Country Forever with Airplanes and Rifles” in PM 22 February 1943, n.p. Ben Robertson Papers. The Four Freedoms were later illustrated by Norman Rockwell. They, of course, included freedom of speech and worship and freedom from want and fear. FDR made it clear that these freedoms should be encouraged throughout the world, not just within the United States.
D.W. Daniel, a long standing Robertson family friend and professor of English at Robertson’s Clemson College, attended the wedding of Robertson’s parents, was present with the family when young Ben was born, watched him as he came of age in the Clemson College town of Fort Hill, and taught him to develop persuasive arguments that he was regularly encouraged to defend within the college’s Palmetto Literary Society. Upon Robertson’s passing, Daniel found words of expression that he shared in a eulogy within Clemson College’s Memorial Chapel in March of 1943. He, too, noted that Robertson cared about the oppressed throughout the world and was about the task of championing their human potential and dignity:

Ben was a friend to humanity, and human beings were his friends. He walked and dined and talked with Prime Ministers and Presidents but never lost the common touch. He was at home with Congressmen and clowns, with the haughty and the humble. He shared his joys but kept his sorrows ‘deep pressed’ in his heart of gold. . . . Ben’s was a sincere, sanguine soul that soared above the sordid selfishness of self-seeking men. His was a soul that sympathized with the suffering and sought to succor the unfortunate and the distressed. His was one of those rare spirits that roamed realms remote from rude minds. His was a spirit that forever fared forth to find truth, justice, and right; and he had faith that they would triumph. . . . In the highest sense Ben still lives and will live in the influence that he exerted for good, in the principles for which he stood, in the justice for which he fought, in the lives of those whom he inspired, and enshrined in the hearts of the hosts of friends who
loved him. No other Clemson man was so widely known, so greatly admired; no other will be so keenly missed.\textsuperscript{11}

Repeatedly, D.W. Daniel noted how Robertson’s spirit and actions inclined toward “justice and the common good” and that he “had faith that they would triumph.” These are necessary tendencies for someone who has committed to the wilderness errand. Robertson held onto a freedom ideal that he adopted from his spiritual ancestors and remained faithful to it. He truly felt that diverse communities of justice and compassion could be fashioned and was able to find kindred souls along his journey who believed in this as well.

Of course, contemporary readers may be more accustomed to thinking about a liberator or emancipator as being a person more specifically focused on the plight of the enslaved or oppressed and not on major ally nations under siege. Recent efforts in South Carolina historiography by Vernon Burton and others have revealed that several South Carolinians, both black and white, were working quite vigilantly for greater freedoms for the oppressed within the state well before the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision.\textsuperscript{12} Ben Robertson was one of these valiant souls but was not mentioned in their review. In his personal journal, which he kept in Washington D.C. as he covered President Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts for the Associated Press, Robertson

\textsuperscript{11} D.W. Daniel Eulogy for Ben Robertson, Jr. March 1943, Ben Robertson Papers.

\textsuperscript{12} Winfred B. Moore Jr. and Orville Vernon Burton, Toward the Meeting of the Waters: Currents in the Civil Rights Movement of South Carolina During the Twentieth Century (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).
shared his belief in the social equality of the “Negro.” He also received a note from George Washington Carver while in D.C. that is worth sharing in full. Although efforts to discover the reasons for Carver’s high regard for Robertson have not led to any conclusive answers, it is clear that Robertson did something that mattered deeply for Carver. Robertson wrote to defend human freedoms within allied countries, but he also realized the need to address racism in his own upcountry and South, as Carver indirectly suggested in his personal, handwritten note:

Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute

January 1, 1934

My dear boy, Mr. Robertson:

It seems so fitting that I should send word of greeting on this the first day of the New Year.

I wish for you the choicest the year has in store.

I thank God for you, many, many times every day.

Admiringly yours,

G.W. Carver

---


14 George Washington Carver to Ben Robertson, January 1, 1934, Ben Robertson Papers. Further research revealed that Robertson’s mentor in college, President Riggs, invited George Washington Carver to Clemson College in the fall of 1923, just months after Robertson graduated. According to Clemson’s historian, Jerry Reel, Carver continued to have collaborations with Clemson College through the 1930s. As the state chemist or toxicologist who worked at Clemson College, Ben Robertson, Sr. would have worked with Carver.
Evidently, Robertson earned the respect of this major African American leader despite his Southern heritage and the color of his skin because of something he did for Carver and perhaps for his fellow African Americans. The concern for others that D.W. Daniel and Tom Waring Jr. noted in their reflections on Robertson’s life was not limited to those of the white community as was the case for many leaders in South Carolina in Robertson’s time. He also respected the rights and dignity of black people and worked to further their freedom efforts as evidence within this thesis will reveal. Carver’s letter also suggests that Robertson would have appreciated the words of thanks that Carver offered to a God they both respected. He knew that Robertson’s efforts were inspired, in part, by his spiritual life and heritage.

Robertson also came of age in an era when women were working with caring others to claim their undeniable freedoms. Throughout his career he would write about the efforts of courageous women near and far who were making contributions toward the construction of freer civil societies. In *I Saw England* he honored the efforts of Hilde Marchant, a top-notch female reporter for the British *Daily Mail*, who covered the plight of everyday working class citizens who were making Herculean strides to keep Hitler at bay, all the while hoping that their efforts would eventually lead to greater social and economic justice after the war.¹⁵ He even gave her nephew refuge in the states months before Americans became fully involved in the freedom fight.¹⁶

¹⁵ Robertson, *I Saw England*.

¹⁶ The nephew, Leslie Collins, has recently given his papers to Clemson University.
Robertson also noted the humanitarian efforts of women throughout his coverage of the Battle of Britain. Even in his later *Red Hills and Cotton* he developed a finely nuanced portrayal of Mary, an African American woman, who at the end of his reflection called upon her extended upcountry community to work and pray together as they joined, after the recent attack on Pearl Harbor, the world-wide freedom struggle, a struggle that Robertson and she hoped would lead to greater freedoms back home for struggling farmers, mill workers, women and minorities.\(^\text{17}\) Robertson made a point to highlight in his writings the deeds of oppressed women who were fighting to be freer.

Perhaps Edgar Snow best understood Ben Robertson’s freedom-yearning spirit. A friend of Robertson’s at Missouri’s School of Journalism who remained in touch with him throughout his career and who became well-known for his own coverage of liberation efforts after the publication of his *Red Star Over China*, Snow reflected on Robertson’s character in his 1943 book called *People on Our Side*. In its opening pages, Snow explained why he himself was ultimately able to commit to the war effort as a U.S. war correspondent. He noted that Ben Robertson had helped him restore his respect for the press:

> Ben Robertson was going abroad for *PM*, too, but when I told him something about my experience he didn’t seem properly impressed. “I never had any doubts about this job of ours, Ed,” he said. “We’re worth as much as a couple of generals.”

> “Brigadier or four star,” I asked. But Ben didn’t like it when I called him general after that; he believed exactly what he said. I never knew anybody in the

business, except Ray Clapper, who managed to keep his respect for the press so intact and so helped to restore my own. Ben’s sense of mission and obligation were still as crusader-like as when I first met him on the campus at Missouri, where we listened together to old Walter Dean Williams preaching his creed of journalism. Ben went on believing it and living up to it until the day a year later when he crashed in a clipper outside Lisbon on his last assignment.\textsuperscript{18}

Robertson, it seems, influenced at least one leading journalist at a critical decision point in his career. Based on Robertson’s character, conviction and sound sense, Snow was able to re-affirm his belief in the press that Williams had helped instill within his students at Missouri. He also hinted at Robertson’s spiritual conviction as he noted his “sense of mission and obligation” and his “crusader-like” zeal. A brief review of Williams’ International Creed for Journalists reveals just what a high view Robertson held for the press’ public service role and helps readers understand Snow’s respect for Robertson whom, he believed, upheld the creed’s tenets to his dying day:

\textbf{The Journalist’s Creed}

I believe in the profession of journalism.

I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of lesser service than the public service is a betrayal of this trust.

I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism.

I believe that a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true.

I believe that suppression of the news, for any consideration other than the welfare of society, is indefensible.

I believe that no one should write as a journalist what he would not say as a gentleman; that bribery by one’s own pocketbook is as much to be avoided as bribery by the pocketbook of another; that individual responsibility may not be escaped by pleading another’s instructions or another’s dividends.

I believe that advertising, news and editorial columns should alike serve the best interests of the readers; that a single standard of helpful truth and cleanness should prevail for all; that the supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service.

I believe that the journalism which succeeds best—and best deserves success—fears God and honors man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride or opinion or greed of power, constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient; always respectful of its readers but always unafraid; is quickly indignant at injustice; is unswayed by the appeal of privilege or the clamor of the mob; seeks to give every man a chance and, as far as law and honest wage and recognition of human brotherhood can make it so, an equal chance; is profoundly patriotic while
sincerely promoting international good will and cementing world comradeship; is a journalism of humanity, of and for today’s world.\textsuperscript{19}

Robertson was required to memorize this Creed as a student at Missouri. The creed emphasizes the urgent need for the freedom of the press so that people can get the information they need to make decisions about their lives and communities. It also suggests that journalists should be free to fight injustices as trustees or servants of the public. In addition, it unabashedly suggests that journalists should be servants of both God and humankind—suggesting a blending of commitment to both a secular and spiritual ideal of public service, yet another wilderness errand inclination. Furthermore, the creed definitely pushes a global perspective as it encourages journalists to promote “international good will” and cement “world comradeship.” Again, a component of Robertson’s freedom ideal is that he hoped that people throughout the world—and not just within America--could live within communities that encouraged the freeing of human potential for the common good. Americans he thought should work toward this lofty goal by leading human rights initiatives such as Wilson’s League of Nations or Roosevelt’s United Nations.

\textsuperscript{19} Ronald T. Farrar, \textit{A Creed for My Profession: Walter Williams, Journalist to the World} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 203. Robertson later wrote a full-page article for the \textit{New York Herald-Tribune} that honored Williams as he was appointed in 1930 to the presidency of University of Missouri. See Ben Robertson, “He Never Went to College,” \textit{New York Herald-Tribune}, November 23, 1930, Ben Robertson Papers. Many women were enrolled in the school so the use of “gentleman” is a bit confusing. It should have included “or lady.” Williams had no problem referring to God within a creed for state university students. Many other American leaders also felt comfortable with such language such as President Roosevelt as he offered America’s war aims in various speeches.
If Snow was indeed fair in his assessment of Ben Robertson as a journalist, then Robertson believed he was a trustee of the public, that he was a public servant who should be about the task of building a humane world community by bringing the news to the people—the people being the ultimate rulers within democratic or liberating covenant communities. As a young but aspiring journalist when he memorized the creed, Robertson probably found some of his evolving understanding of freedom within it. He could have readily embraced it since it encouraged a fine blend of Calvinistic virtues (honesty, duty, service) that his own Baptist people had preached with an egalitarian social justice ethic that he would begin to acquire as a prolific reader in his young adult years and as a cadet at Clemson College. Williams’ Journalism Creed for his World Congress of Journalists reads like a modern “errand into the wilderness” text that Bercovitch and colleagues could include within their growing jeremiad collection.

This thesis is an exploration of Robertson’s understanding of his freedom ideal as an international journalist and writer during the first half of the twentieth century. How did a white male from the upcountry of South Carolina become a champion of freedom-seeking communities throughout the world in the first half of the twentieth century? What did he do within his forty short years that suggests his commitment to this freedom ideal?

Most past treatments of Robertson’s life and legacy have focused on his contributions as a writer from the South or as one who wrote primarily about the South. In an Introduction to the third edition of Red Hills and Cotton, historian Lacy K. Ford, Jr. portrays Robertson as a budding native Southern son who would have enriched the
South had he lived longer. Ford sees him as a progressive with some populist leanings. In a later review of Robertson’s work in *Southern Cultures*, Ford gives him a bit more credit as an “affable critic” but not as a global champion of communities that honor universal freedoms. Ford concluded his foreword in *Red Hills* by stating that Robertson’s richest legacy was *Red Hills and Cotton* since it had enabled so many readers to share moments of reverie with him. Other historians have cited Robertson’s work as being representative of writings within either the Southern Renaissance or what David Davis has recently reconfigured as Southern modernism although several have excluded him from their ever-evolving canons. Yet, the scholars who have honored his work have not developed detailed analyses of Robertson’s contributions in


this literary movement. They have credited him as an insider critic of the South but not as a writer from the South who used his texts to showcase global freedom-enhancing efforts. Several other scholars have focused on Robertson’s work as a journalist, but they have not investigated his freedom agenda. In fact, Jodie Peeler, in her dissertation from University of South Carolina, suggests that Robertson used his journalistic efforts to build a platform for his own local political interests.²⁴

As this thesis will reveal, Robertson devoted most of his civic career to documenting how diverse people throughout the world were about the tasks of building communities based on their growing understanding of their incontrovertible freedoms. He created images of the possible for readers with humanitarian bents and offered them within his daily press reports, articles, extended nonfiction texts, and within his intergenerational family saga that was thinly cloaked as historical fiction.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on Robertson’s formative experiences within the upcountry of South Carolina as well as his additional preparation at Missouri’s School of Journalism. The second chapter, then, offers just a few of the ways in which Robertson infused his early journalistic efforts with his freedom ideal. Robertson’s writing career began around 1926 when he was about twenty-three years of age. His first assignment was in the far-flung islands of Hawaii. He then worked with

various papers within the Pacific. Later, in 1929 and just before the stock market crash, Robertson came back to the states where he experimented with various journalistic venues for about the next ten years. These professional efforts included a five-year stint as a journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune* and a three-year one with the Associated Press as a White House and Supreme Court correspondent during Roosevelt’s first Presidential term. Eventually, around 1937 Robertson returned to his upcountry South Carolina at the age of thirty-four in hopes of completing a family settlement saga that he had begun in distant Java back in 1927. He also became involved in local politics and developed a few free-lance pieces for local and national venues. The thesis will conclude with Chapter Three that is an examination of some of Robertson’s journalistic efforts from June of 1940 until about February of 1941. As Hitler’s aggressive assaults began, Robertson volunteered as a U.S. war correspondent and was then immediately assigned to the newly minted *PM*. He wrote almost daily about the evolving freedom struggle within England beginning just after the British retreat from Dunkirk. He covered the Battle of Britain beginning in August and followed it with unrelenting passion until late December.\(^{25}\) As he did, he also made note of the ways in which the British seemed to be questioning their assumptions about the human rights of diverse others, how they began to rethink their imperialist tendencies

\(^{25}\text{Robertson continued to cover the Battle of Britain and other fronts for PM until his passing in February of 1943. This thesis only addresses his earliest coverage of the Battle of Britain. Furthermore, it does not include a detailed analysis of his *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory* either simply because it would make the study far too lengthy.}\)
and their allegiances to the laborers and women within their midst as well as their responsibilities to human beings within their ever-expanding realm. While on a short wartime leave, he crafted his *I Saw England*, a reflection on how England reclaimed her spiritual understanding of freedom in her darkest yet finest hour.\(^{26}\)

As this thesis will support, Robertson’s ongoing freedom quest was intimately related to his professional efforts as an international journalist and writer. He believed that his writings about people and communities who were struggling to be freer could help his interested readers grapple with their basic assumptions about the democratic experiment and in so doing rejoin the effort with renewed insight. As he stood upon Shakespeare’s Cliff in the midst of a world war, he renewed his claim to his freedom ideal. He knew he could give his life for the preservation and extension of what he considered universal God-given freedoms as revealed within his family’s spiritual tradition and adopted within his country’s evolving constitution.

\(^{26}\) Throughout this thesis, the word “spirit” will be used as a synonym for the moral and creative agency of the human being (natural tendencies toward awareness, coherence, intentionality and mutuality). It is not intended as a term that relates to a particular religious tradition. Erik Erikson’s understanding of human agency is the idea I want to convey. See his uses of it in his biographies and studies of youth such as *Gandhi’s Truth* (New York: Norton, 1993).
CHAPTER ONE
CULTIVATING STRENGTHS FOR FREEDOM’S SAKE

When Ben Robertson, Jr. was born into South Carolina’s upcountry at the turn of the century in April of 1903, there was little to suggest that a high-brow, globe-trotting freedom writer with a strong humanitarian bent would evolve within it and then pledge to come back to do all he could for it. As several Southern and South Carolina historians have noted, many Carolinians of both races faced obstacles to economic and political freedoms as well as social and personal ones during this time.27 How did young

Ben Robertson, with the help of family, friends and community, negotiate these
currents?

As Robertson came of age, many powers and practices were at work to obstruct the freedoms of many South Carolinians in both the upcountry and low. The economic barriers were several. First, much of the state overly relied on King Cotton for economic prosperity. Of course, textile companies did continue to evolve during this time at a rapid rate making the upcountry city of Greenville the Textile Capital of the country, but in many cases these companies led to fortunes for the families of white male owners and rewards for managers and investors while laborers were often paid a pittance. Laborers’ efforts to collectively bargain continually proved futile. As C. Vann Woodward would note about the New South in general, there seemed to be mint juleps for the few and pellagra for the crew. Many well-to-do farmers also suffered. They had low harvest yields as a result of poor farming practices that led to the depletion of their soils. In many cases, they had to sell their family farms, support them through tenancy or become tenant farmers themselves. White upcountry women had even tougher constraints. Very few of them could support themselves in any independent way or contribute beyond the home except through the drudgery and long hours of textile mill labor. Many white children were also forced to work long days in the mills or on their tenant farms to help their families make ends meet. African Americans were practically barred from the mills except for the most menial of tasks so they had even fewer economic options. Black men could become tenant farmers or eke out an existence as struggling middle class merchants, small business owners, or professionals who worked primarily among their own people. Black women could serve as maids and such. Their children were limited to fieldwork and menial farming tasks since they could not work
within the mills either. In addition to these limited income-producing options, the tax base within the state was so meager that little could be done to address the state’s many economic woes in any systemic way. Roads were sorely needed especially as automobiles began to roll down Henry Ford’s assembly line. Urban and town infrastructures were in sorry shape as well. Even cities like Charleston needed the help of civil engineers.

Politically, the prospects for freedom seemed just as bleak. Even though Ben Tillman had taken control of the state in an effort to address white farmers’ pressing needs, the majority of the state’s African American males had been unmercifully disenfranchised as a result of his leadership within the 1895 Constitutional Convention. As Ben Robertson came of age, the state’s Jim Crow laws were in full force as blacks and whites attended different schools, worshipped in different churches, drank from separate fountains, and ate and slept in different hospitality establishments. Blacks could not serve on juries and as a result, the courts did not offer them much justice. Women, of course, still had no vote—neither white nor black. By 1910, when Robertson was about seven years of age, a new political faction evolved. A large contingency of white male voters from the various mill villages ushered in the gubernatorial leadership of Coleman Blease to preserve what Walter Edgar has graciously called the mill villagers’ entitled sense of republican individualism. They did not want “do-gooders” messing with their rights to raise their children or manage their affairs. Blease made Tillman appear a staunch Progressive as he denounced child labor
reform, mocked the idea of mandatory schooling, and insisted that health care professionals keep their inoculations to themselves.

As if these and other economic and political barriers were not enough, South Carolinians faced social and personal barriers to a life free and brave. For example, many Carolinians at the turn of the century could not even imagine an integrated, egalitarian community. Prejudices and misconceptions restricted the freedoms of both races in several ways. Fears and hatreds fueled unnecessary violence. Laws related to women and children restricted many as well. Often as a result of these laws, women were still expected to work within their homes, let their husbands lead, and remain silent on political issues. Children were to be seen and not heard. Several institutions also perpetuated ideas that were stifling. Some churches, for example, led children to believe that it was a sin to question the stories of the Bible or the way the world was. The state legislature did little to support intellectual curiosity in terms of educational offerings. For many families, schooling beyond the primary grades was not a major priority and not available.

Another freedom confounding idea that ailed the state was a lingering sense of the Lost Cause. Monuments were still being erected to honor Confederate soldiers within local town squares. Many white citizens still refrained from celebrating the 4th of July and chose instead to honor Confederate Day or May 10, the day Stonewall Jackson died. Many white citizens felt defeated even though they still had a strong sense of honor in having contributed to what they perceived to be a valiant cause. This defeatist attitude made it difficult for them to move forward with hope or connect in meaningful
ways to supportive national currents. The state lacked funds and resources to support
the arts and basic research. H.L. Mencken would by 1920s deride the South by
proclaiming it the “Sahara of the Bozarts.” Furthermore, as Robertson would note in
*Red Hills and Cotton* and as other scholars would support, many Carolinians at the turn-
of-the-century were literally quick on the trigger and apt to engage in destructive
behaviors such as drinking, gambling and smoking. As if these disabling tendencies
were not enough to trip up the most well-meaning of freedom seekers, many within the
state suffered from malnutrition, which led to illnesses such as pellagra and hookworm.
This list of constraining influences could continue.

With so many obstacles to a free and meaningful life, how did young Ben
Robertson begin to envision his notions about freedom? How did his extended family
and community help him? Did his college years make a difference? What about his stint
at Missouri’s School of Journalism? What were his own unique virtues that helped him
cultivate his freedom-yearning quest? How could his freedom vow upon Shakespeare’s
Cliff make sense within the arc of his life story?

Despite the many listed barriers to freedom, there were some progressive leaders at
work within the state who had the background and courage to imagine and work toward
a stronger and freer South Carolina. One of the most far-reaching educational
visionaries within the state was a scientific leader who married into the state before the
Civil War and who believed that sound scientific education could help the state prosper
and regain its stature as a leader within the nation and who staked his fortune on it.
After the Civil War Thomas Green Clemson eventually bequeathed his adopted
upcountry land to the establishment of a scientific institution that would be a “high seminary of learning.”\textsuperscript{28} Clemson, a gentleman infused with Enlightenment ideals, saw scientific education as a way to enhance the freedoms of a populace. Shortly after the Civil War and as President of the upcountry Pendleton Farmers Society, Clemson, John C. Calhoun’s son-in-law and mining engineer, sent letters to friends in high places such as a professor at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington in 1866. In his letter he explained how critical scientific education was to the survival of his state:

There is in my opinion no home for the South short of wide spread scientific education. Our condition is wretched in the extreme. Every one is in trouble, many ruined, and others are quitting the country in despair. The late harvests have been short, many are in want, and the state treasury is as empty as most of the inhabitants find their pockets and granaries.

The Agricultural Society wishes to set the example by establishing an institution, which will in time secure permanent prosperity. I commend the purpose to your attention. Perhaps it may be in your power, through your correspondence to have it published in England. There are persons in that land who can appreciate our effort.

\textsuperscript{28} Reel, \textit{The High Seminary}, ii.
Anything that you can do, will aid a cause which is a crying want, and advance
the cause of civilization, among a people as chivalrous and well intentioned as
any other on the face of the earth. . . .\textsuperscript{29}

Just a few years later in a published article “The Principles of Agriculture” Clemson
summarized the urgency of his plea for science education within the Palmetto state:

\begin{quote}
Our condition is critical, our inheritance is in jeopardy, and we can not expect to
retain it without a radical change from the past; without a change we shall
witness others prospering on other portions of estates which we have abandoned
as exhausted. We want light. Civilization only advances through the sciences.
Unless we keep pace with others, in that respect we shall stand as a mark for
contrast. If we endure, if we retain our possessions, it will be done through those
laws with which we have either had little acquaintance or neglected to apply.
Multiply schools of science; make them gratuitous and thus give opportunity for
their acquirement, and application will flow. If the advantages should not be
availed of (which I very much doubt) then lay a tax upon ignorance.
Science will open up new avenues for profitable occupation to individuals,
which will redound to the power of the state; resources now lying dormant, will
give occupation and wealth to unborn millions.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Alester Holmes and George Sherrill, \textit{Thomas Green Clemson: His Life and Work}
(Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie Incorporated, 1937), 146-147.

\textsuperscript{30} Holmes and Sherrill. \textit{Thomas Green Clemson}, 147-148.
Clemson’s abiding and methodical vision, his political clout and resources eventually enabled the much rowdier Governor Benjamin Tillman to push forward with his vision for a more practical agricultural education in ways that led to the establishment of Clemson’s scientifically oriented land-grant college that would serve the needs of white male students from the upcountry who had more democratic ideals versus the needs of the low country elite who might feel they could be better served by an institution with more aristocratic ideals. By 1894 Clemson Agricultural College that was to be a high seminary of learning opened its doors on John C. Calhoun’s former estate that the Clemsons had inherited and bequeathed to their beloved state. Into it came Ben Robertson, Sr., the future father of our freedom writer.

Ben Robertson, Sr. hailed from a large and well-established upcountry farm family who had built their way of life on the Twelve Mile River in Pickens County, about fifteen miles from Clemson College. According to family legend, Robertson, Sr. was given the option to inherit and farm half of the family’s nine hundred acre farm. Instead, he chose to go to college, the first in his family to do so since the devastating aftermath of the Civil War. As the story goes, he loaded up a small bag, rode his horse to the nearby town of Liberty, said his good-byes and then boarded the Southern Railway train headed to Calhoun Station, just a mile or so from the college campus.31 Once enrolled, he majored in chemistry and eventually graduated in the college’s first class in 1898. Shortly after his graduation, in 1899 Robertson married Mary Bowen, a true beauty and

---

31 Click Seaborn and E. Lollis, interview by author, videotape recording, Pickens, SC, Spring 2002.
a first graduate of what became Winthrop College in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Her college was supported by United States land grant funding that was used also to support Clemson College. Land grant colleges were part of a national effort to establish colleges throughout the country that would engage in research and outreach to enhance the quality of the nation’s citizens, that would give to many the opportunities to develop skills to enlarge their freedoms while preparing them to help others do the same. Service to the state and country was a major mission of these land grant institutions supported by the Morrill Act.\textsuperscript{32} Mary Bowen Robertson also came from a well-established upcountry farm family in the northwest corner of Pickens County, a farm not too far away from the Robertson home place. Like the Robertson clan, the Bowens came down the Carolina Road and settled in the area in the 1750s on what was then Cherokee land. Their land looked out on Table Rock, the iconic Blue Ridge granite mountain, the sacred site where the Cherokee gods allegedly feasted. Their upcountry cotton farm extended for miles and miles. Eventually, Mary and her husband, Ben, became involved in the life of the Clemson College community. Robertson became an instructor of chemistry. As a result, he earned a small dwelling within the campus’ Hotel Hill, a residential area that the college provided for its faculty. It was within the Robertson’s rented apartment that Ben Robertson, Jr. lived as a child from 1903 until 1910. He would come of age within the scientific seminary community that Clemson envisioned.

Both of Ben Robertson, Jr’s parents were civic activists with progressive leanings. By the time they were ready to assume leadership within their college community, the country had elected a Progressive Republican President, Theodore Roosevelt. He was eager to enhance the freedoms of Americans as he also enjoyed his. Roosevelt helped break up major monopolies that were hurting the free enterprise of small businessmen. He also helped ensure the launch of a rural mail delivery system that helped communities like the college town of Clemson connect to the larger civic community, and he began to do what he could to regulate the quality of food that was sold and bought within the country—an issue that would affect the policies and practices at an agricultural school. Furthermore, his administration would do all within its power to conserve wilderness lands from developers. The purchase of these large masses of Western lands would eventually led to the creation of America’s national parks, one of America’s best, freedom-inspiring ideas since it offered citizens sanctuaries, jointly owned and managed, where their spirits could be renewed and strengthened. These natural sanctuaries would remind Americans that they stood for more than just capitalistic extravagance. Clemson College grappled at this time with the possibilities of establishing a forestry department to support, in part, Roosevelt’s efforts, as his administration pushed for other Progressive agendas as well. Amazingly, Clemson

---


College was ahead of the nation in terms of its thinking about higher education and the implications for outreach within states and the nation. The Smith-Lever Act was finally approved in 1914. Lever, for whom the Act was named, had been a Life trustee of Clemson College. With his behind-the-scenes leadership, Clemson College had already placed county extension agents in every county and had worked with the other African American land grant institution, South Carolina State, to make sure that African American extension agents were hired as agents as well. Clemson proved a national leader in efforts to extend the freedoms of adult farmers and homemakers through free and accessible practical education for both white and black farm families. In his early professional life Ben Robertson, Sr. would become a part of this extension effort. He also served his local community in other ways as well. He volunteered as the secretary of Clemson’s first alumni association, volunteered as a pollster, and created a land development group that helped design one of the first private residential areas near the campus. In addition, he and his wife became founders of the First Baptist Church near Clemson College, where he taught Sunday school for many years. Mary Robertson became involved in a progressive effort as a founder of the Tamassee Daughters of the American Revolution Industrial School. The school for girls was built in the remote northwest corner of South Carolina as an extension effort of Clemson’s Fort Prince George chapter. Mrs. Robertson gave one hundred dollars to the General Endowment Fund and served the school in others ways as well.35

35 Local Newspaper Clippings and Family Documents. Ben Robertson Papers.
During the Christmas season of young Robertson’s seventh year, his mother prepared her last tray of holiday treats. Her insulin rose too high, and she lost her life. The family suffered mightily. Mrs. Robertson’s sister, Mrs. Wade C. O’Dell (Aunt Bettie Bowen O’Dell of nearby Liberty) stepped in to help raise young Ben and his younger sister Mary. The two Robertson children moved to Liberty, and it was while living there on and off for about four years that young Ben Robertson would get to spend extended time on the Bowen and Robertson farms. It was within this upcountry farming community that young Ben would develop his sense of family history and find mentors who gave him a few tools and wisdom for launching his spiritual and civic errand.36

In *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, Ben Robertson reflected on his coming of age years upon the family farms. Home from covering the Battle of Britain, he had a few weeks before the bombing of Pearl Harbor to write about his earlier life. He devoted quite a few passages to describing how his kin and community had shaped his character as this passage begins to suggest:

My kinfolks thought more about character than about culture. They said culture could be acquired but character had to be formed. Character had to be hammered into shape like hot iron on an anvil. It had to be molded in the most exact form.

So they gave me books to read and work to do and they gave me time of my own, but always they were guiding and directing and advising and

---

36 Seaborn and Lollis Interview.
pouring their own wisdom into my growing mind. Hundreds of precious hours were devoted to my education by my parents and aunts and uncles and by my grandparents and my Great-Aunt Narcissa and by Margit and Mary and Bill. They left culture to chance—I was free to develop in that realm as I chose. They left nothing to chance about character. . . . Over and over again they told me, I had to amount to something, I had to be somebody, I had to hold on, to wait, I was to live with dignity, with honor, I was to do what was right. My kinfolks wanted me to stand like one of the mountains, like the granite of the Blue Ridge. . . . 37

Robertson’s kin took great pains to shape his character. Interestingly, in this passage Robertson included the African Americans--Margit, Mary and Bill--as kinfolks. He probably meant they were like kin. They were a part of his spiritual family, the family that would help him stand like one of the mountains, the family who would help him be strong “like the granite of the Blue Ridge.” They did let him read books and have time on his own to develop what he may have been referring to as “culture;” but they were quite hands on in terms of helping him develop character.

Two of his most beloved mentors were Great Aunt Narcissa and Windy Bill. Both were on the Robertson side of the family, and both were freedom seekers--and a bit unorthodox. Great Aunt Narcissa was on the Clayton side or his grandmother Robertson’s side of the family. It was really the Clayton land that the Robertsons

37 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 220-221.
actually lived upon on the Twelve Mile River. As Ben Robertson and other living
descendants have also verified, the first Robertson settlers made their home on the
Keowee River, closer to what became Clemson College.\footnote{38 Dick Robertson, interview by author, Greenville, SC 15 August 2012.} Narcissa Clayton was
well-educated for her day and had a sense of beauty and elegance. She was proud of
her yellow garden that Robertson honored in \textit{Red Hills}. She also taught herself to
speak French, loved to read, and memorized passages from \textit{Lady of the Lake}. Unlike
the Bowens, she had a restless spirit, a spirit that the older roving Robertson in later
years would acknowledge as his own. In the following passage, he revealed her
pragmatic and progressive spirit:

\begin{quote}
At my grandparents’ white house on Wolf Creek [the Bowen family farm
house] there was certainty about everything – about heaven and hell, about the
South, about us and the purpose of our civilization. But at the old house on
Twelve Mile, where my Great-Aunt Narcissa lived, there was little sureness
about anything–only constant doubt and self-questioning and an uneasiness that
increased for our future. According to my grandfather and grandmother
[Bowen], the American nation was caught in the nets of Northern capitalists, and
the duty of us in the South was to wait until those nets had rotted with inevitable
failure and decay. Our Great-Aunt Narcissa, however, was not at all assured that
the grip of the industrialists would relax with the mere passing of time, and she
was not positive in the conviction that even if this system were imperfect, we
were wise in our time entirely to resist it. She asked how we knew we were not

\end{quote}
letting ourselves become like the carriage-makers and harness-dealers. It was
more fundamental than that, was my grandfather [Bowen]’s answer; the country
was faced with two conceptions of living, with a Northern and a Southern ideal,
and we in the South could not compromise, we could not give in. Our one value
was our faith, our steadfastness, and if we budged we were lost, for we had no
talent for the factory system; we had not the ability, even if we chose, to use
money to make money.

Nonetheless, our Great-Aunt Narcissa was not sure–she continued to
consider the advisability of our trying to adjust ourselves to an actual situation.
To my grandfather, all life was a tide, a roaring rip tide that ebbed and flowed.
To my great-aunt it might not be a tide at all; it might be a steady forward-
moving force, a river that ran over dams and in the end wore down even granite
mountains.39

The world-roving writer home from the war front, honored a kindred soul in his
recollecetion of Narcissa. In his earlier fictional settlement saga, Travelers’ Rest, it
was the version of history that Narcissa preferred that shaped the structure of his
tale. He, too, came to see life as a “steady forward-moving force,” one that could
eventually move or wear down mountains or obstacles to freedom that seemed
insurmountable.

Shortly following this passage within Red Hills, Robertson let his readers in on a
friendly debate down at the Bowen place that transpired upon their “broad piazza”

39 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 150-151.
or their upcountry version of the town meeting hall. While his great Aunt Narcissa was visiting with the Bowens, she made a compelling point about the upcountry and its need, perhaps, to adapt to change. She was willing to let her ideas stand up to scrutiny:

I remember my grandfather and grandmother and my great-aunt sitting one warm evening on the piazza at Wolf Creek, and of my great-aunt using buffaloes and passenger pigeons and mockingbirds to illustrate her thesis. “Buffaloes and wild pigeons were unable to adjust themselves to changing times; mockingbirds were able to make an adjustment, and mockingbirds are still with us—they sing just the same.”

“Buffaloes and mockingbirds,” announced my grandfather, quietly and positively, “have nothing to do with us. We are farmers. We intend to continue to farm.”

“Perhaps,” said my Great-Aunt Narcissa, “we should try to balance our farming with more industry.”

“Where would we get the money for industries?” asked my grandfather.

“From the Northern capitalists,” said my great-aunt.

This attitude outraged my grandfather and grandmother. Sometimes they said to us: “Your Great-Aunt Narce is like all the Claytons—she is actually proud of being peculiar.”

---

40 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 151-152.
Here, Robertson invited readers to realize that as a child he had plenty of opportunity to engage in or at least listen to and store away insights from a whole host of kin who were trying to make sense of their lives. He showed how Aunt Narcissa was quite adept at building arguments with figurative language, a crowning feat within the Western rhetorical tradition. He noted, too, that his conservative grandfather responded to her in a civil manner, “quietly and positively” even though he disagreed with her. This was, as he well knew, the essence of civil discourse. Narcissa was a role model in the sense that she would state her mind quite openly and despite the opposition she might encounter. She helped him realize the strength of women in general as he traveled throughout the world. He would often delight in and write about people who were “peculiar”—who were free enough to express their eccentricities.

Robertson’s other fine mentor was Windy Bill, whom Robertson called “the gentle murderer” since he had to spend some time in jail for a crime he probably never committed. Robertson also referred to him in Red Hills and Cotton as a “Senegambian,” a full-blooded black, and like Narcissa, he had been in the Twelve Mile Valley for generations. On the Robertson farm, Windy Bill “fed the mules, cut stovewood, played on a banjo, drank lightning liquor, hunted possums, talked about the world and everything on the broad piazza.”41 Here Robertson let his readers know that despite the Jim Crow horrors within his state, Windy Bill had a regular

---

41 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 180.
seat within their family’s “broad piazza.” Windy Bill loved to tell his tales, an inspiration, for sure, for Robertson the writer. Folks in the upcountry today still remember Windy Bill Hendricks and the stories he told. He even turned his jail time into a sweeping story:

It was at Bethany Grove Church that Bill himself was charged with killing one of the brethren. He told my great-aunt [Narcissa] he drank some moonshine, and that when he came to, they told him a man was dead and that he had killed him. Bill said he did not believe he had killed the man, for if he had, then the man would have "hanted" him, and the man had not "hanted" him. Therefore he had not killed him. Someone else had done the killing. Bill convinced my great-aunt, but he could not convince the jury; witnesses testified they had seen Bill shoot. So down to Columbia went Bill--off to the penitentiary. As time went on, he became a trusty, he hunted possums in the swamps for the Governor's table, and during the entire term of one Governor he hoed roses around the Statehouse. Almost every day Bill would say to the Governor: "Boss, when are you going to let me go back to Miss Narcissa?" The Governor would answer: "Bill, if I let you go, who will hoe the roses?" Bill would say: "I reckon that's right, Governor."43

---

42 Seaborn and Lollis Interview.

43 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 182-183.
During Governor Blease’s reign, the Robertsons went down to Columbia to secure Windy Bill Hendricks’ pardon since the Governor was giving them out with wild abandon:

Bill came back to the old house like a knight from a crusade. Wonderful things went on at the penitentiary, he told us; wonderful gamblers were in there; wonderful guards stood on the stone walls—Bill said those guards had guns that would shoot from there to Richmond. He told us he was nothing but a plain cotton-field nigger when he went down to the penitentiary, but now he was as sharp as a Yankee. He went off to Pickens the first Saturday night of his return, and on the next afternoon my great-aunt and Margit, walking home from taking flowers to the cemetery, found him in a gully by the side of the road. He said: "I'm just resting, Miss Narcissa."  

Here readers see a bit of the trickster. Even in the penitentiary, Windy Bill was free. His imagination was epic. He saw “wonderful gamblers.” He did not let the penitential time destroy his fun-loving spirit. He could get himself out of trouble with his quick-witted responses. He was just getting a little rest on a Sunday afternoon after all. More than any other southern Renaissance writer during the 1940s, Robertson crafted compelling and soulful characterizations of African Americans interacting with the white community in ways that revealed their strengths and not their deference. Young

---

44 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 183-184.
Robertson loved the freedom he felt when he was with his trickster mentor chasing possums in the cool of the night:

When the first frosts came, nipping the sweet-potato leaves and sweetening the persimmons, Bill would light a lantern, call his lean hound dogs, and hunt possums. All night long we would hear his deep powerful voice echoing through the hills and hollows. He would yip like a rebel in the old Southern army and then he would call to the dogs: "Speak to 'em, boys." The hounds, picking up a trail, would move faster as they gained on the possum, their baying would swell into a steady chorus, and the woods for miles would sing the music. I always understood why Bill liked to hunt possums—somehow it lifted your spirit to thrash through deep woods at night, stumbling along by lantern light, directing a pack of dogs; it gave you a wild feeling of escaping, of being free, of standing alone against darkness and all the forces that bound and cramped you. I hunted possums whenever I had the chance, and sometimes I hunted when I was forbidden to—I would slip through a window and go hunting with Bill.45

Like a fine literary naturalist, Robertson, home from the Blitz, recalled the freedom he felt in “standing alone against darkness and all the forces that bound and cramped” him.

Windy also helped young Robertson learn to spin a fine tale—to cultivate his seemingly natural ability that enabled him to live his life as a roving reporter, one of few Americans who could truly make a living by writing:

45 Robertson, Red Hills and Cotton, 185-186.
One autumn Bill went out six nights in a row. He slept most of the daytime and let everything but possum-hunting go. On the seventh morning my Great-Aunt Narcissa knocked on Bill’s door and angrily forbade him to hunt another time until he had pulled his fodder. "The fodder is going to rack and ruin," said my great-aunt in exasperation, "and here you are running wild at night--chasing over the country when there is work to do. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. It's trifling to hunt possums when your fodder is still in the field." She shook her finger in Bill’s face. "You're not going another time, do you hear, until the last bundle of fodder is piled in the barn?" Dejected, sorrowful, Bill sat in a low chair before the fire, saying: "Yes, Ma’am," and "That's right," to everything my great-aunt said. "I won't go another time, Miss Narcissa--I'll get the fodder in."

That night we had hardly finished supper before once again the hounds started baying. "Speak to 'em," echoed Bill's deep voice through the hills. With that, my great aunt got mad. Next morning she was up early, beating on Bill's door." "Miss Narcissa," said Bill, backing into a corner, "I didn't intend to go again, I didn't mean to." He swallowed hard. "I was sitting here, thinking, when I heard something running loose behind the spring branch--it was knocking down saplings like a bear. So I got the dogs and went to see what it was, and it was a possum. It was the biggest possum I ever laid my eyes on." Bill clasped his long hands." Yes, ma'am, and finally I got it treed. I sawed off the limb it was hanging to, and the dogs grabbed it, and I chained it by a leg to a stump and then
went over to the barn and got a mule and hauled that possum in. I dragged it.

Miss Narcissa, that possum weighed more than ninety pounds."

"Where is it?" asked my great-aunt acidly. Without batting an eyelid, Bill said:

"Miss Narcissa, I cleaned the thing and put it in the washpot to boil, but it was so fat it melted completely into grease."\(^{46}\)

Bill was a wise old trickster who had figured out a way to live freely in a plain and simple way, a way that even Thoreau, one of Robertson’s literary mentors, would appreciate. In yet another passage that Robertson shared about Windy, his beloved mentor, he takes us into his cabin, one no bigger than Thoreau’s:

One of the happiest experiences of our lives, when we were growing up, was to visit Bill in his one-room house beyond the spring branch. The place was filled with the strong scent of home-raised tobacco, with the dusty smell of ashes on the hearth. There was a jug under the bed, a gun on the wall, a banjo in the corner, Sunday clothes on a peg. He was as fond of us as we were of him, and he would twang the banjo and sing to us by the hour—ballads, gambling songs, blues songs, hymns like “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me.”\(^{47}\)

Away from the big house, young Ben Robertson found a soulful place where his heart could sore. A born musician, he loved Windy Bill’s genres and his rendition of hymns like “Rock of Ages.” Robertson found solace in spiritual music throughout his life. As a jazz pianist he would frequent speakeasies in Harlem and make notes

\(^{46}\) Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 185-188.

within his journal of the lyrics he was learning. He knew Windy Bill’s people had
developed a new American art form that was taking hold throughout the jazz-filled
world. He knew that that art form had stemmed, in part, from a fusion of African
American rhythm and old-time Puritan spirituals. From Windy Bill, Robertson not
only learned to love music and the simple and free life, but he also learned how to
tell stories and to think on his feet, how to make things happen as an unlikely white
trickster.

By the time young Robertson turned ten, his father decided to remarry. He
chose as his second wife, Miss Hattie Boggs of Liberty, a fine lady from a
Presbyterian family, a family that was quite proud of their world-roving missionary
kin. Robertson and his sister Mary moved back to Clemson by 1914 and into a new
home on Sloan Street within a new subdivision that their father had helped develop.
Within a few years they had a step-sister, fondly called Boone-y, in honor of their
Daniel Boone family connection.48

As the blended Robertson family moved into their new home within the
upcountry’s land-grant college community, they were also entering a new era within
national and South Carolina politics. The progressive Woodrow Wilson assumed the
Presidency of the country and Richard Manning, a progressive from a long line of
distinguished Carolina leaders, became the state’s Governor. Wilson had
connections to South Carolina and Manning was a life trustee at Clemson College.
Robertson’s father had also assumed a position as state toxicologist, a role that

48 Seaborn and Lollis Interview; Robertson Interview.
required him to analyze fertilizers that were being sold to farmers throughout the state, making sure that their content was indeed what their companies suggested. He also presented scholarly papers about his work within the state and at national conferences. Close-by and throughout the state and country, young Robertson could get a real feel for progressive ideas, policies and practices that were shaping the world around him. According to Bryan and Robertson’s sister, Mary, Ben was an avid reader during this time. He devoured books within the college library and followed current events in the local news. He was often found at the local drug store, trying to get the latest world news on the developing war.  

As Robertson came of age within the college town, he had many other ways to nourish his growing interests as well. Mrs. Mary Dargan, an engineering professor’s wife, encouraged him as his music teacher at the Clemson-Calhoun Elementary School. Years later, she insisted that Robertson could have been a professional concert pianist. She remembered that he played compositions by Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart. He also collected phonograph records. Upon the family piano, Robertson played not only classical compositions but also ragtime and blues and the “stirring chords of Clemson’s military marches.” He also spent hours practicing for the high school band.  

Robertson also developed some enduring friendships during this time. As a youth,

49 Local Newspaper Clippings and Family Documents. Ben Robertson Papers.

50 Local Newspaper Clippings and Family Documents. Ben Robertson Papers.
he became friends with Wright Bryan, who would also become a reporter. Bryan’s father was also a graduate of Clemson College and a member of its staff. Both youngsters lived within walking distance to the campus, attended Clemson-Calhoun Elementary School, which was headquartered for a time in John C. Calhoun’s Fort Hill home in the center of the college campus, and then graduated from the new Clemson-Calhoun High School. Bryan in later years shared several stories about his enterprising friend. While in high school, a neighborhood friend, W. W. or “Woots” Klugh talked Robertson into setting up a business. They wrote every fur house that had advertisements in The American Boy and The Southern Ruralist requesting free booklets on how to trap minks. They spent a fortune on two-dozen steel traps but then lost everything at the first freshet on the Twelve Mile River. Bryan’s story also inadvertently revealed the kinds of magazines Robertson was reading at the time. Both of them were designed, in part, to help young men develop civic values and meaningful leisure pursuits. His remembrance also revealed, indirectly, that Robertson was learning to write at an early age to help his dreams along. He was using persuasive writing at this early stage. He would go on to win a writing and speech contest spearheaded by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.51

America finally entered the war in 1917 when Robertson was about fourteen. Clemson College was tapped as a training camp, and President Wilson, with his connections to the state, helped bring Camp Sevier—as well as other military camps

throughout the state--to nearby Greenville to prepare thousands of soldiers and help boost the state’s economy. In total, Clemson had about seven hundred students who served in the war but that number also included those who were headquartered on the campus as part of the Student Army Training Corps (SATC). Young Robertson would have followed their deployments and freedom-enlarging efforts as an avid reader and college community member. Tragically, just weeks before the war was over, Robertson’s stepmother lost her life to the deadly influenza epidemic as she served as a nurse for some of the SATC recruits on campus. The unexpected death devastated Robertson’s father. He never married again and was unable to speak publically at a ceremony held years later to honor his wife and other women who had participated in this home front war effort. Young Robertson was beginning to get a real feel for the costs of war. One of the Clemson cadets in the class of 1918 was killed in battle on September 13, 1918. Before he died, he wrote to his parents, “Don’t worry about me; just remember what we are fighting for.” Robertson was around cadets and community leaders who felt they were sacrificing their lives for a liberating cause.52

In the fall of 1919 Ben Robertson, Jr. enrolled in his father’s alma mater. The war was over but help was still needed to rebuild Europe along more democratic lines. The YMCA had been active on the Clemson campus for years and had recently worked with Clemson President Walter Merritt Riggs and Clemson’s architectural chair, Rudolph Lee, to build the campus’ stately YMCA center with the support of a Rockefeller grant.

52 Ben Robertson, Sr. to President W.M. Riggs. n.d. Ben Robertson Papers; High Seminary, 209.
The YMCA recruited Riggs to work in France to educate American veterans who would help with European rebuilding efforts. Riggs did accept the offer and was away from campus for a few months in the spring of 1919. This seemingly unrelated fact is important in that Ben Robertson worked closely with President Riggs throughout his four years at Clemson. Robertson served as the tireless President’s pianist for his YMCA glee club, beginning in his sophomore year.53 In addition to serving his country and running the college, Riggs was a hands-on college leader. He not only directed the glee club, but he also taught the Bible study classes at the Y. The materials that were used were based on the progressive Christian beliefs and publications of the renowned Baptist minister, Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick. As minister of the Rockefeller-endowed Riverside Church in New York, he encouraged, as did the YMCA, an ecumenical Christianity that emphasized social outreach and address of systemic injustices and inequalities. It was a part of what religious historians have called the Social Gospel movement. Riggs seemed to embody this ethic. He was, for example, one of the few college presidents who lent a hand to the African American President of South Carolina State College as they cooperated on ways to build an extension service throughout the state. He also worked with the YMCA to bring to the campus the first ever African American speaker, George Washington Carver, in 1923, just months after Robertson graduated. As a mentor, President Riggs offered Robertson and other cadets a model of a South Carolina native who had a global sense of civic mission while also

53 *TAPS.* vol. XIII (Clemson, SC. Clemson College, 1920)).
giving of himself in personal ways to the college and state in ways that helped a whole
host of people—black and white—who were struggling to get a grip and move forward
in strength.\(^{54}\)

President Riggs also supported another endeavor that cadet Robertson was
passionate about. Robertson, along with several other friends, launched through the
YMCA one of the first all white jazz troupes with in the state and country. In 1919 jazz
was just taking hold, yet at Clemson, it had arrived. Robertson, as the pianist, was one
of the ringleaders in the formation of what became the enduring Clemson Jungaleers.
The Jungaleers played throughout the upcountry and beyond and were in demand.
These “exponents of aristocratic jazz” helped define the fusion of a pre-World War II
Southern music and a liberated jazz of the twenties. With deep South bass and horns,
Robertson perhaps realized that the Jungaleers could help export a new Southern sound
that was a tad spiritual as well—especially in a modernist—Jungian way. The Jungian
connection is suggested in their band’s name—The Jungaleers. As a cadet closely
connected to his college’s YMCA offerings, Robertson found yet another way to pave
his way toward a freer way of living and being.\(^{55}\)

Perhaps more significantly in terms of helping this budding freedom writer, the
YMCA also sponsored Literary Societies on campus and allowed the students to use the
facilities within the YMCA community center for their Friday night debates. Robertson

\(^{54}\) TAPS, vols. XIII-XVI (Clemson, SC. Clemson College, 1919-1923); Reel, *High
Seminary*.

\(^{55}\) TAPS, vols. XIII-XVI (Clemson, SC. Clemson College, 1919-1923).
joined an established and progressive Palmetto Literary Society that was more of a debating club. Strangely, unlike at Wake Forest, a Baptist College in North Carolina, Clemson required all cadets to be members in literary societies, but they received no credit for it. The Wake Forest students, in contrast, did. The Tigers protested this seeming injustice in a letter to the editor within their student newspaper, *The Tiger*, but to no avail. The debating societies met once every other week after supper on Friday nights. Each society had a formal slate of officers and set rituals that included opening remarks, a prayer, a joke, a reflective essay prepared by a member or invited guest, and then a formal debate that was judged by a qualified group of reviewers. Brief minutes were published in *The Tiger* from time to time. Interestingly, topics included more national and international topics than local ones such as the extension of weekend passes. The young Tigers debated whether the allied war debt should be cancelled by the United States. They also developed positions on whether labor unions promoted the best interests of working men and weighed arguments on whether the U.S. government should own and operate coal mines. One team argued persuasively that the governor of the state should have the right to pardon. The affirmative side won the debate about the possible need for compulsory public schooling in South Carolina. Debaters also successfully argued that in terms of morals, double standards should be abolished. Evidently, Robertson had the opportunity to develop and defend arguments of moral significance in a civil way, an essential civic skill that he could and would use throughout his freedom journey.\(^{56}\)

\(^{56}\) Reports on Literary Societies, *Clemson (South Carolina) Tiger*. September 1919-
In addition to the YMCA offerings, other extracurricular activities may have had a strong influence on Robertson’s understanding of freedom as well. Robertson chose to serve from time to time on the school newspaper and became the major editor of the senior *TAPS* yearbook, a major undertaking and a huge volunteer service—not a requirement. More than any other single task, this effort may have helped Robertson begin to understand how a whole host of cadets, staff, faculty, administration and community members worked together with state and federal support to provide an institution that expressly prepared future civic leaders to imagine and work toward their own American dreams as they also considered the rights that others had for those same possibilities. Very early on Ben Robertson learned how to analyze a community and then synthesize their accomplishments in ways that would hopefully strengthen them further as they would read about and reflect upon their college experiences in the years to come.\(^{57}\)

In addition to these various extra curricular activities, the required curriculum that Robertson matriculated through helped him develop essential skills, understandings and discipline needed to be a citizen soldier who could, if required, help defend America’s freedoms. A few influences were especially noteworthy for a budding recorder of freedom efforts. First, he had a rigorous general education curriculum even though he was a horticulture major within the agriculture program. In his first years, for example,

---

\(^{57}\) *TAPS*, vol. XVI (Clemson, SC. Clemson College, 1923).
he enrolled in American literature courses with heavy reading and writing requirements. He had to develop twelve essays based on his analysis of twelve self-selected American classics from a proscribed reading list. He also benefitted from courses in Western Civilization, mathematics and science. A University of Chicago graduate, Professor F.H.H. Calhoun, taught Robertson’s geology course in which he taught evolution without a blink. At Wake Forest, in contrast, the college President was under fire for even suggesting that the school should teach evolution within its science curriculum. The professor who offered Ben Robertson’s eulogy, Dr. D.W. Daniel, taught a required general education course in speech. His published textbook provided detailed procedures that helped cadets prepare their arguments for their required debates within their literary societies and for their future leadership efforts. Daniel, himself, traveled throughout the country as an orator and spoke on behalf of U.S. Senators and other public servants of note. D.W. Daniel helped Robertson write persuasively, a skill he would use throughout his career as he thought about and wrote about American freedoms. Another part of Robertson’s required curriculum that evolved as a result of World War I was mandatory participation in the ROTC program. Cadets had to enroll in at least two years of ROTC classes, but they could elect to take more. Robertson chose to go through all four years as well as the required summer training, earning the rank of first lieutenant. This preparation enabled him to be eligible, in part, as a U.S. war correspondent in 1940. Again, he was in a program and curriculum that prepared him for service to a country that touted its commitment to the preservation of freedoms.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{58}Jerome Reel, conversation with author, Clemson University Special Collections,
The character building activities that mattered most during Robertson’s college years seemed to have been ones that had a voluntary leadership and moral component to them, and Robertson certainly acted on those, but his required curriculum also prepared him as well for service to his country. His ROTC courses were practically a minor, and his literary courses and speech classes helped him nurture his literary talents. Furthermore, Robertson found several role models from his own state who could help him imagine a way to be a public servant interested in the common good. Robertson took advantage of many good offerings in South Carolina’s high seminary and land grant college. Like his mentor Windy Bill, he could turn what some cadets might consider a penitentiary stint into a situation that worked for him. Like Windy Bill who hunted possums and cared for roses at the Governor’s mansion during his prison term, Robertson, during his regimental military college life, played in a jazz troupe that entertained thousands, read American literary classics, developed a strong body and mind, developed life-long friendships, thought about helping others as part of a progressive Christianity, and assumed a major leadership role as a writer. Like a good trickster, he made his “regimented” college life work for him in various creative ways.

After graduation in 1923, Robertson eventually moved West. Missouri was an almost perfect match for the restless American eager to see the world and write about it. At Missouri’s School of Journalism, one of the few in the country at the time, he would meet and connect with a whole host of journalists who had international aspirations and

---

hopes of spreading and documenting democratic communities in the making. It also offered him yet another fine mentor with Southern and Protestant religious roots whom Robertson would honor later in a *New York Times* tribute as his Dean Walter Williams was tapped as the next President of University of Missouri.\(^59\)

When Robertson arrived at University of Missouri, legend had it that he was rather shy. It was a relaxed weekend and several of the leading students were hanging around in the student center. One perturbed upper classman asked if anyone could play the piano. He wanted to hear a little jazz. Amazingly, Robertson found a place on the bench and began to belt it out. He proved a sensation. The gathered assembly loved him. He was even invited into their honorary fraternity Phi Beta Theta, although surely his other talents had a bit to do with this as well. Despite his rather shy demeanor that he eventually overcame based on all accounts of him as he covered the Battle of Britain, he met friends who remained with him throughout his career. They shared leads and stories and swapped tales about one another. None was more faithful and supportive than Edgar Snow, who became well known for his detailed coverage of China in books such as *Red Star Over China*. He and Robertson spent time together in Hawaii soon after they graduated in 1926 and stayed in touch as Snow found his way as a stowaway onto mainland China where he resided until he agreed, at Robertson’s urging, to sign on as a U.S. World War II correspondent assigned to *Life*. Snow, more than others, knew

Robertson’s abnormal idealism and belief in his mission as his quote within this thesis’ introduction suggested. Clearly, he knew that Robertson believed in his mission of sharing the everyday efforts of folks, within the states and beyond, who were about building freer, secular, yet still spiritual communities.  

At Missouri Robertson learned important skills and enrolled in basic courses that addressed the history, knowledge, and skills needed within the profession, but it seems that the greatest support he received from the school was the confidence and respect of Dean Walter Williams. Robertson’s tribute to him was quite lengthy, taking a whole page within the flagship New York Herald Tribune. In it Robertson shared practically every virtue that corresponded almost perfectly with his own emerging understanding of the ideal freedom-extending hero. He noted, for example, that Williams was from humble roots but through hard work and perseverance had risen from the ranks of a red devil to a reporter who developed well-received pieces related to “cabins, coons and cider.” Williams then progressed until he became editor and then owner of several papers. Robertson was also quick to note that Williams had Southern ancestral roots. Always a plain dealer, Williams had a simple home in which he offered simple

---

hospitality to travelers throughout the world: “There during the winter they burn logs in their fireplaces as a matter of Missouri tradition and at their table the guests are served hominy and hot biscuits and fried smoked ham.” Here, Robertson begins to add the American Puritan idea of simple life to his freedom mix, an idea he would come back to again and again, one that he found meaningful in the life and works of Thoreau and Windy Bill. He seemed to be building the case that if your tastes were simple and plain but good, then you did not have as many wants, you were freer, freer from the needs to purchase or possess.

In addition, Robertson re-emphasized that Dean Williams had strong Presbyterian roots, that he even edited the *St. Louis Presbyterian*. He tried to explain that the Williams clan had been quite pious in the old Puritan or Calvinistic sense but had no trouble giving up their scruples for a chance to strike out West: They were “Presbyterians of the type who would not bake bread on the Sabbath, yet who thought nothing of making the journey westward from Virginia and Kentucky.” Always fascinated by the religious persuasions of his key informants and major characters, he found this ironic trait worth sharing. It also captures a dual set of traits that he would find in his own upcountry people and that he would record in his fictional saga *Travelers’ Rest*. Although his people from Pennsylvania were strict in their religious observances, they were forever restless, always yearning to go West or travel beyond the next mountain. Their spirits were restless but they also had an abiding sense of duty. This would prove a struggle that Robertson would wrestle with throughout his own freedom journey.
All in all, Dean Walter Williams was a fine model for the contemporary American freedom-searching pilgrim from the upcountry South especially since Williams had translated his calling into a secular, public ministry and was about the task of spreading good news of “international comradeship” the world over through the network of journalists that he was slowly preparing within his progressive World Congress of Journalists. As shared in this thesis’ Introduction, Williams even had a creed that Snow believed Robertson embodied. It was a secular version of the good news and golden rule and one that Franklin D. Roosevelt could have heartily embraced within his New Deal efforts in the years to come. Far from a capitalist imperialist eager to help his recruits make money by catering to the moneyed elites, Williams was about the task of preparing a cadre of journalists who could share the good news of everyday American pilgrims doing valiant deeds throughout the world while also calling attention to lesser lights who were obstructing such efforts. Robertson was prepared and ready to follow his mentor’s lead.61

Clearly, Ben Robertson had more than enough educational experiences as well as supportive family and mentors who could have helped him realize his American freedom quest that was deeply rooted in the American literature and history that he had read with relish throughout his youth. He had teachers and supporters within his

immediate family, his extended upcountry farming community, within the Clemson college town, within Clemson College and while a student at University of Missouri. He was not a wild-eyed visionary with few skills or connections. Rather, he deliberately drew on the progressive support he found around him as he began to realize his abiding passion—to help usher in a vibrant beloved community through the sharing of persuasive stories that would perhaps lead others to join in on an ongoing conversation about what America was and could be as a beacon of freedom.
CHAPTER 2
FORGING A FREEDOM THEME

For about thirteen years between 1926-1939, Ben Robertson, Jr. crafted stories about everyday people who were tinkering with ways to make civil societies freer. Some of these stories were daily press reports in various newspapers throughout the world. Others were articles in popular magazines. He also took time over a decade to write a historical fiction about the settlement of his Clayton kin in the upcountry of South Carolina. The first part of this review begins with an analysis of some of his first articles as a reporter for two papers in the Pacific from about 1926-1929. The second part addresses his freedom writing efforts in New York while employed by the *New York Herald Tribune* from about 1929 to 1933. The next set of selected writings related to Robertson’s evolving freedom pilgrimage relate to his public service as an AP correspondent for the White House and U.S. Supreme Court. The final focus then will be a look at some of Robertson’s writing and civic efforts while back in his hometown of Clemson, South Carolina, where he was putting the finishing touches on his novel *Travelers’ Rest*. What do these stories reveal about the man who stood upon Shakespeare’s Cliff when the world was up for grabs?

It may seem a bit of a stretch to suggest that a twenty-something globetrotting newspaperman fresh from the upcountry of South Carolina could be a genuine freedom seeker with a major mission, but Robertson’s published piece in *Current History* in 1932 suggests just that. Evidently, Robertson looked around as he rambled with his journalist friends from Missouri in the flora-drenched Hawaiian isles that became his
haunt for his first post-Williams assignment. Robertson’s first position in the Pacific was as a reporter for the Honolulu Star Bulletin (1926-1928). Robertson had a regular beat but enjoyed the off-time companionship of Edgar Snow and Bob Unseld, friends of his from Missouri’s School of Journalism. None of Robertson’s articles from the Honolulu Star Bulletin have been preserved with the Robertson papers at Clemson University, but drafts of published work as well as feature articles that appeared years later capture the kinds of thinking he was engaged in at this early point in his career. One of Robertson’s essays from this early professional period, “Hawaiian Melting Pot,” was published in 1932 in Current History, about four years after his service in Hawaii and upon his return to the states. By publishing his work in this journal for American policy makers, Robertson went straight to the top with his insights about the citizens of Hawaii. He wanted nothing less than to admit Hawaii to America’s union. That it would take until 1959 (or twenty-seven years) for this to happen suggests the magnitude of his request and his challenge to conventional ways of thinking; yet Robertson insisted that welcoming the Hawaiians in would be very American, very much related to the country’s evolving understanding of herself as a home and champion for the free and the brave. Robertson’s biggest concern, it seemed, was that Hawaii was still just a mere American territory when it had already given America so much with so little in return. It had given millions of dollars in tax revenues—more tax support than several American states—but had not received one penny of local appropriations. In addition, diverse Hawaiians had learned to play together quite well and as a result had built a rich and vibrant covenant community of incredible diversity that had more than paid its dues;
yet, despite this loyalty and good will, they had no real power. They had no representatives within Congress as a territory of the United States. They could not even have a minor role in forming policy or directing resources. They wanted more. The multicultural community wanted autonomy, responsibility within the larger Union, and a place at the table:

No people will accept for long the privileges of freedom without demanding that they be allowed to share the obligations and responsibilities. There is a strong movement for statehood. Former Governor Farrington has expressed the desire:

“We feel that our progress entitles us to recognition as equals. There is just one way in which that recognition can be granted—by statehood. We do not ask it for economic reasons. It might or it might not be better for our commercial status. We ask it as a matter of autonomy.”

To build this case Robertson used a battery of persuasive claims. For example, he noted how diverse Hawaiians were able to work together in a civil way:

[Hawaiians] have established order, set up and carried on a government, organized industry and finance, established political and religious freedom, and to a degree almost unparalleled in contemporary history have learned to respect a neighbor’s right of dissent.

---


63 Robertson, “Hawaiian Melting Pot,” 315.
He then supported this claim with a series of colorful examples that were memorable and apt. He also argued that since 1898 a certain degree of social equality had evolved upon the island. He attributed it, in part, to the tolerance that the diverse groups of Hawaiian provincials, Chinese, Japanese, California American and New England missionaries were beginning to cultivate; but he was careful to explain that the tolerance he observed did not suggest that the Hawaiians had melted into one new Hawaiian syrup. Rather, he celebrated their ability to honor their various allegiances:

There is not a person in Hawaii who would place any State assembly above his own in matters of loyal allegiance. In their private lives, they attend Central Union Church, slip off their shoes at the door of the Buddhist Temple in Nuuanu Valley, wear holokus, Japanese kimonos, or attend the Chinese theatre, or dance in the moonlight to the melodious native music. They have struck the happy medium of existence. All give; all take; none attempts to dictate to the other. Much of this condition has resulted from the friendly disposition of the Hawaiian. He has taken the Chinaman from his workshop; he has broken down the formalities of Japanese manners; he has mellowed the stern Puritanism of the missionaries from Massachusetts.64

Robertson also felt that their sense of cohesiveness might have stemmed from their agreement on the major issue facing all of them--the sugar tariff.

Robertson continued with his claims for admitting Hawaii into statehood. He noted their natural resources, strategic location within the Pacific, and the large number of

---

64 Robertson, “Hawaiian Melting Pot,” 313.
Japanese—reminding American readers that they represented over one third of the territory. He did note that the U.S. Army had the capacity to crush the Japanese should they rebel, but he seemed to assert that if Hawaii were admitted to statehood that such a violent confrontation would prove unwarranted and such harsh policing efforts would be unnecessary. Still, he seemed to forever have an eye on the potential threat of Japanese imperialism within the Pacific.

At this early stage in his writing career, Robertson focused on freedom-loving territorial citizens who wanted to be Americans. As he noted in his quote by Farrington, the Hawaiians were not interested primarily in possible financial gain. Instead, they were pressing the issue of statehood in terms of “a matter of autonomy,” a matter related to enlarging the freedoms of the citizenry. Robertson was writing to enlarge the freedoms of both Americans and the territory of Hawaii. He argued that it would help America to let the Hawaiians join the Union.

Robertson’s second assignment within the Pacific was with Australia’s *Aidelaide Times* from 1928-1929. His daily writings for that press enabled him to eventually publish several articles within *Asia*, a new American journal that had just been launched in New York during the twenties and *Travel*. These articles continued to incorporate glimmers of Robertson’s freedom theme obsession. One of those articles, “No Sunday School Town,” revealed, in particular, some insights about American freedom that Robertson was continuing to refine.65

---

65 These are some of the articles that Robertson published based on his time with in the Pacific. Ben Robertson, “Australia’s Sons of Perdition,” *Travel* July (1929): 35; Ben
When Robertson made it to the Australian outback from Adelaide, he found his way to Broome on the far Northwest coast. People from all over the world had come to the tiny, desolate town despite the scorching heat, lack of suitable transport, and what many conservative outsiders of the Commonwealth and beyond perceived to be its disgusting aboriginal backwardness. These seekers had all come for one primary purpose: profits and pearls. Even a businessman from the country of the free and the brave was quick to assess the town’s merits on strictly economic terms: “It is good to discover that a needed economic purpose is served by Broome, that its people love the blighted place and that, in addition, its annual balance-sheets show a satisfactory profit.” Robertson also noted that it was an American explorer by the name of “Tay” who first “discovered” the potential of Broome and started the first pearling industry there in 1861, forever changing the native pearling industry. After giving a thorough description of the segregated hamlets within the town that had sprung up over the decades, he offered insights about the grueling, dangerous, competitive, stratified working conditions that had evolved in this mother-of-pearl capitalistic enterprise:

Usually each of these plucky craft [boats] carries six to eight aborigines or Orientals and one white man. Once at work, the boats eye one another like Carolina buzzards. When one of them pauses for any lengthened halt, all the others swoop

down from every vulturous direction—guessing, with no manners, that a workable pearl-bed has been found.\textsuperscript{66}

He then shared an extended vignette of a visiting drunken American who knew little about American politics, did not appreciate the role of the press, and was not a great ambassador. A small excerpt will suffice:

Leaving-day came. “Troost Avenue,” sober enough to say good-by, brought along the latest edition of Broome’s weekly “rag,” just published. It contained the news we awaited so anxiously: “New York, Nov. 6—The United States presidential election on Tuesday resulted in the rout of the Democratic Party and the return of Mr. Hoover by an overwhelming majority.” “A bloody shame, I reckon,” said “Troost Avenue,” going on to give his reasons. “I ‘ad hoped to see Al get it. Maybe then the country would have opened again and flourished. We [to him both Australians and Americans were “we”] will never have prohibition in Australia. We’ve got too strong a government.” The whistle blew; bells clanged; the all-shore gong sounded; the gangway came up. We moved into the stream. “Good-by! Broome ain’t so gawd-awful!” yelled “Troost Avenue.”\textsuperscript{67}

Robertson hammered down on the capitalistic excesses and lack of decorum and plain good sense coming from travelers from his own American community. In captions for the article’s six images, Robertson suggested that the aboriginal people seemed freer

\textsuperscript{66} Robertson. “No Sunday School Town,” 616.

\textsuperscript{67} Robertson. “No Sunday School Town,” 617.
than the money-grubbing mother-of-pearl seekers, some of whom had “spent a lifetime in matching pearls for a single strand.” After centuries of living and being in their place, the natives could appreciate their treasures. They could take the heat, dive for their daily food, delight in the flora and fauna and dance by the light of the moon. They seemed to savor the simple, spiritual freedoms that Windy Bill, Robertson’s young adult mentor, would have appreciated. They were far freer than the American capitalists he portrayed, who were interested primarily in their profits. By the time this article was published, the stock market had crashed. America needed to reevaluate its mission and identity. Robertson was helping readers with this essential task as he reflected once again on his outback journey and then shared it with an interested audience. He had the courage to share America’s darker side. Are these the kinds of influences Americans want to have in the world? Is this who Americans really are?68

A few Australians did offer, however, some insights about how to work together for greater freedoms. One person who captured Robertson’s imagination was a rising Labor leader, James Henry Scullin. Around May of 1930 when Robertson was back in New York, he completed a fine biographical sketch of Scullin after the leader had assumed his elected position as Prime Minister of Australia.69 In this extended reflection on Scullin’s history, character and political persuasion, Robertson seemed enamored by


69 Ben Robertson, “Scullin,” Ben Robertson Papers. The sketch was discovered within Robertson’s papers in draft form but it must have been published sometime around November of 1930, perhaps within the New York Herald Tribune.
the shepherd who rose to prominence through self-education, hard work, and belief in the rights of working people. Robertson portrayed Scullin as a rising emancipator akin to Abraham Lincoln in the sense that he was of humble roots but rose in prominence to lead his people. Scullin was not well known within either the Commonwealth or the U.S.A., so Robertson offered the introduction: “The world could scarcely recall the sound even of his name.”70 According to Robertson, the Saxons and Tories were shocked to hear his story. For starters, he was Irish. Robertson then portrayed him as “a soap box orator” who organized unions and participated in strikes and was “a Socialist of the first radical faith.”71 Even David Dow, an American emissary to Australia, shared that Americans found him scary: “as though expecting to hear of some Soviet Russian who wore red ties and consumed raw meat.”72 Some thought that the election of such a leader “to head an orthodox, civilized government was anything short of constitutional treason or red terror.” The Australians, however, were not cowed by this conservative opinion. They knew nothing revolutionary would happen unless it is was the will of the people. Robertson explained that the Australians saw Scullin as a “trade unionist of the

---

Robertson waxed about Scullin’s evolution as a leader. He noted that he was born on a farm near Ballarat in Victoria where he worked in the wheat fields and cared for cattle and sheep. He then became a clerk in a store. While working there he began to hear the speeches of dapper, young English gentlemen of the Fabian Society. Intrigued by their socialist theory, he and others began to put it into practice. Robertson also noted that Scullin and his colleagues learned to debate, a skill that he had developed at Clemson College. Miners and retailers discussed radical topics and learned to develop public speeches. By the time he was twenty-nine, Scullin was running for major elected offices—losing and winning as the years passed. While out of office he served as an editor for The Ballarat Echo, “a sort of New Masses publication of that day.” For the past eight years he had served as The Honorable Member of the Federal House of Representatives. He had become an honorable gentleman through hard work and civic activism.

Robertson then tried to explain Scullin’s political persuasion to a wary audience. He made comparisons to American politics, noting that Scullin’s positions, even as a Labor Socialist, had an American flavor—especially after the recent Wall Street crash

and depression. As Robertson would have appreciated, Scullin “warned the people that whatever reduction was to be made in the cost of production, it must result from fields other than the expense of labor. And peace in industry must result from conciliation and not from coercion.”

Robertson tried to paint him as what Americans would eventually call a New Deal Democrat. Scullin pulled himself up through self-education while his character, demeanor and natural abilities earned him some standing in conservative circles. Robertson, himself, struggled with his political affiliation throughout his career, but in an almost opposite way. He was born into a conservative family with plenty of capital and some political influence, but he was more radical in his egalitarian beliefs that stemmed from his progressive Christian ideals. This enabled him to work well with both labor leaders and political heavy weights within America’s conservative circles. Somewhat like Roosevelt, he was liberal in his social beliefs but born within a conservative political and economic tradition. Scullin probably helped Robertson think about his own emerging political identity. In turn, Robertson, who had grappled with the nature of Scullin’s rise and character, was willing to help New York Herald Tribune readers examine their thoughts on what it meant to lead others in an attempt to extend freedoms for diverse constituents.

Perhaps one last insight into Robertson’s journey within Australia will help illumine how he was thinking about his Pacific adventure. One of his journal entries from the period offers surprising and convincing evidence that Robertson and even his

---

traveling buddies were on a spiritual freedom pilgrimage. His group was sometimes referred to as the Hawaii Group or the Galahad Gang. The group included some journalist friends from Missouri and at least two women, one of whom was Dorothy Harrigan, to whom he dedicated his *Travelers’ Rest*. Robertson shared their collective understanding of the Southern Cross, the constellation they pondered while camping at night in the Australian Outback. With allusions to classic literature and world history, they thought about the constellation’s significance as they stated their spiritual aims:

Dante was the first Westerner, the authorities say, whose imagination was stirred by these stars of the Southern Cross. He saw them, they believe, listed on an Arab chart and in *Purgatorio* he said, “O desolate indeed, thou northern region, since upon these stars thou are bereft of gazing.”

Dante named them Justice, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude and so praised them that ever since the Southern Cross has existed in the mind of the Western world as the symbol for marvelousness in the distance. Men for centuries, gazing in the cold winter of Northern Europe, at the Great Dipper and the Northern Star, have longed “To travel, to see the Southern Cross.” It was the fourfold morning of starshine to Swinburne. Amerigo Vespucci in his diary recorded: “In these heavens there appeareth a marvelous cross in the myddest of fyue notable starrs which compasse it abowt. This crosse is so faryre and bewtiful that none other heavenly one may be compared to it.”
[Translation] In these heavens there appeareth a marvelous cross in the midst of fair notable stars which compass it about. The cross is so fair and beautiful that none other heavenly one may be compared to it.”

The Southern Cross bothered the peace of mind of people as ancient as the Chaldeans and here it shone this evening, exciting within us the same sense of despondence. It stood for all we did not know and knew that we did not know yet like Ambition, it urged us on. That one star of the first magnitude in the Cross, we decided, must be the one that Dante would have us call Fortitude; those two of the second magnitude, must be Prudence and Temperance; the fainter one still, must be Justice. There is a fifth star in the constellation, a star which Dante never knew.

We decided to name it the post, so we called the fifth the Star of Faith. 77

Throughout his life, Robertson thought about virtues, character, and spiritual life as he suggested in Red Hills and Cotton. Here is an early written expression of it. It was as if he and his truth-seeking kindred spirits were bolstered by a faith in creating a better world community, much as the early American Puritans imagined as they undertook their errand into the wilderness. A Baptist from an offshoot of America’s early Puritan religious tradition, Robertson, nonetheless, bowed to the Catholic Dante, a poet revolutionary, who chose to write in his own Italian vernacular and question the social and political structures of his community while remaining faithful to what he perceived to be the universal and mystical dimensions of his inherited Catholic tradition. Robertson could find inspiration in such a noble spirit as well as other seekers down

through Western history who had yearned to be freer as a result of their explorations. This journal entry definitely highlights the teleological dimension of the errand—that there are ideals in the far horizon that the pilgrims yearn for and travel toward.

This guiding vision seemed to be influential as Ben Robertson returned to the states. From 1929 to 1939 he published stories about everyday Americans who were engaged in various stages of liberation efforts. After travels more than halfway around the world, Robertson came to the Big Apple in 1929 to accept a position with the conservative and Republican *New York Herald-Tribune*. While in New York he lived through Hoover’s downfall, the Wall Street crash, the Depression, hunger marches, Harlem’s Renaissance, several labor strikes, FDR’s successful bid for the Presidency, and general racial strife. He lived in an apartment in Harlem on 69 Horatio Street but commuted to the *Herald* headquarters on 230 West 41st Street. As Robertson rode the subway or walked or hailed a taxi, he talked, listened, and observed. After walking through Harlem shortly after settling in the neighborhood, he jotted down a few impressions within his journal:

August 14, 1929

Harlem—plants in pots—begonias. A cat. Junk man, scissors man. “My oysters and clams are good and they are all alive.” With silk hat on man shouting “Watermelon Cutting”—noise—people resting in windows, on sheets. Old woman on box—legs apart smoking a pipe

---

78 Ben Robertson, Personal Journal, 14 August 1929, Ben Robertson Papers.
Alert to the nuances of everyday Americans, he took note of his new neighborhood—
noting the beauty such as the begonias and the eccentric such as the man with a top hat
shouting “Watermelon Cutting.” He also revealed within his journal that he liked being
among the people of New York. He remembered, for example, that one night he supped
with two other reporters, the Count Carl Pueckler, a German who worked for the
Tribune and who lived with Robertson’s southern friend, John Whitaker, a writer from
Sewanee who had roomed with Robertson’s Charlestonian friend at Sewanee, Tom
Waring, Jr. The other reporter for the Herald was James Flexner, son of Dr. Simon
Flexner of the Rockefeller Institute. These privileged scions of Germany, Tennessee,
New York and South Carolina decided to eat at the Piccadilly on West Forty-Fourth
Street instead of attending a $50.00 cancer benefit dinner at the Plaza. They chose to
mesh with the people instead, he explained, because “they [themselves] were poor,”
they had chosen to be.”79

While in New York, Robertson toured museums, attended operas and symphonies,
delighted in the freedom of speakeasies such as Bleeck’s, the Herald’s haunt, sailed
whenever able, worked out at the YMCA, spent evenings with friends from the old
Hawaii gang, followed current events and political stirrings in the city that would shape
the national scene, and worshipped in a wide variety of churches—some of them
African American. In addition, he covered a few local stories—although few are
available within Clemson’s Robertson Papers. He probably spent a great deal of time

beyond the city, covering news down South such as the coal mining strikes in Harlan, Kentucky.\textsuperscript{80}

One of Robertson’s signed feature articles within the \textit{Herald} was “Here to Aid Kentucky Miners,” a tribute to Aunt Molly of Harlan, Kentucky, published in December 2, 1931. In it he tried, in part, to woo New Yorkers with a character sketch of the coal-miners’ queen, a woman with a voice and the ability to shape songs that could change her world. A proud fighter, she had stood up for her friends and kin as they had pushed for better wages from their coal-mining controllers. Robertson became connected to Aunt Molly through New York political activists—and novelist Theodore Dreiser in particular.\textsuperscript{81}

Dreiser was then known for his novel, \textit{Sister Carrie}, and \textit{The American Tragedy}, both of which underscored social injustices. Dreiser, who had been on the West Coast most of his life, moved to New York after the success of \textit{American Tragedy}. Wealthy when he arrived, he was able to purchase a fine apartment in the arts community and stepped up his efforts as a political activist. Eventually, he worked closely with the American Communist Party and was quite active in its International Labor Committee (ILC), the Labor wing of that organization. This was the same group that would fight the injustices down in Scottsboro, Alabama a few years later. In a letter to prominent


liberal intellectuals, Dreiser asked if they could not work together to address some of America’s problems. The result of this query led to the creation of the Dreiser Group—a group not directly affiliated with the American Communist party. One problem that troubled Dreiser, who was neither a Southerner nor from Appalachia, was the trouble coal miners were having in Harlan, Kentucky. Coal miners there worked under tough conditions with little pay and few benefits. As a result, they were pushed to strike. To help these laborers, Dreiser set up the Dreiser Fund. Through subscription, people could contribute to it in an effort to fight the abuses of mine owners. Dreiser and his friends decided to go to Harlan to check out the situation. His group included several well-known authors and activists including Robertson.82

John Dos Passos, a writer with family connections in Virginia and a close friend of Ernest Hemingway, joined the group. Dos Passos had developed realistic portrayals of World War I in his U.S.A. trilogy. Sherwood Anderson, who wrote the American classic, Winesburg, Ohio, was on board as well. Robertson considered him a modern writer and mentor and would use several of his stylistic conventions within his own Red Hills and Cotton, such as the device of a journalist narrator who recorded intimate community life among his own people. Anderson eventually moved to Marion, Virginia, a small rural community near Emory and Henry College in western Virginia. He became the editor and publisher of the paper there and continued to explore the abuses of the corporate system against workers. John Lomax from Kentucky,

participated as well. Lomax, a Harvard graduate from the rural South, eventually became a Works Progress Administration (WPA) coordinator for the preservation of folk culture during the New Deal. Lomax’s son and Robertson became close personal friends, and the elder Lomax came to Clemson at Robertson’s request in 1939 to record the folk music of African American and mill-working families as part of his WPA efforts. In an article published after Robertson’s death, John Lomax, Jr. described the Dreiser group as a “constituted self-appointed committee to investigate conditions in Harlan County.”

This brief background on the Dreiser group is offered only to suggest that these leading lights wanted to help Americans. They were not Russian-inspired Communists who hoped to overthrow capitalism. Most of them had fared quite well under capitalism. They were, rather, precursors to what would be called New Deal Democrats. Dos Passos, for example, moved away from any association with the Communist Party as it became more radical. After traveling with Ernest Hemingway, he retired to his inherited and palatial estate in Virginia. From there he wrote American histories with a conservative stance.

According to Robertson’s article, Aunt Molly boarded the Greyhound bus in Harlan and rode all the way to New York. Robertson was there to greet her when she stepped off the bus. His piece “Here to Aid Kentucky Miners” appeared on a full page

---


in the *Tribune* on December 2, 1931. “Mine ‘Aunt’ Here to Help Dreiser by Blues Song” followed as the subheading along with “Mrs. Molly Jackson Brings Powerful Thanks of Kentuckians for Foreign Aid.” In this piece he had several important points that he wanted his readers to get. First, he wanted readers to know that even though Miss Molly Jackson and her people were suffering mightily, they were of good American stock as her father was a Baptist preacher. She had a gentle and natural dignity about her that came through in her every gesture as his commentary suggests:

Mrs. Jackson’s conversation was enriched with allegory, with frequent idiom and colloquialisms of her section. She drew many similes from the woods and the Bible. She spoke bitterly of the lot of the miners. She did not, however, berate the employers. She even referred to the lot of the people there with touches of grim humor.

Her manner was gentle. She rose when Mr. Dos Passos entered. Shaking his hand, she said, “Howdy, I’m proud to see you again, sir.” She is staying with Mrs. Adelaide Walker at Park Avenue and Ninety-sixth Street. She calls Mrs. Walker “Miss Adelaide” in old-fashioned Southern style. It is no startling thing to Aunt Molly that she is visiting on Park Avenue.

Mrs. Jackson has helped at the birth of more than 600 babies in the mountains of Kentucky. She is tall and thin. She had on a cotton print dress yesterday and
wore gold earrings. She crossed her hands on her lap when she spoke. She is pleasant and friendly, and still knows how to laugh.\textsuperscript{85}

Second, Robertson wanted to make it clear that Molly Jackson’s efforts were gestures of hospitality. She was a part of an ongoing egalitarian exchange that began, in part, when the Dreiser group came down South to see what was going on with the coal miners there. She was not being brought to the North as some kind of provincial for curiosity seekers. She had talent that could be used to help the struggling Dreiser group raise money for its cause.

Robertson also included the lyrics of her blues song. She described how the song came into being as she was feeling rather blue:

She said all she did was just to open my mouth and sing. She wrote the song herself. One morning she was feeling blue so she began to sing. She called the piece the “Kentucky Miners’ Hungry Blues.” “I don’t like it so well,” she said, “but I reckon it is that way because I was feeling so down and out that morning.”\textsuperscript{86}

Furthermore, Robertson wanted the readers to feel a bit of empathy for this musician and her people as they thought about their responsibility as Americans to do something about her plight. He worked with the Dreiser group to organize a fundraiser so that readers could contribute funds as desired to begin to rectify this American tragedy, a tragedy because it was the antithesis of the errand that was essential to the


\textsuperscript{86}Robertson, “Mine ‘Aunt’ Here to Help Dreiser,” n.p.
founding American freedom quest. Good mountain people were being exploited because of capitalistic excesses. Robertson acted out of his conscientious concern for his people. He used his public platform to live out his own quest for freedom as he also called the public to attention about struggles not his own. At this early stage in his career, he helped the oppressed, such as the folks of Harlan, Kentucky in their struggles to be freer.

When Ben Robertson moved from New York to Washington, D.C. in 1933, he was where he wanted to be. His own kinsman from South Carolina, Dan Roper, was now serving in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first cabinet as Secretary of Commerce, the first Carolinian to hold a cabinet position within the U.S. government since the Civil War (according to Ben). He, along with many supportive South Carolinians had done much to secure F.D.R.’s nomination at the Democratic national convention and had then solidly supported him in the national campaign. Robertson came down from New York to serve as an Associated Press correspondent for the White House and the Supreme Court. Lest there be concern that Robertson had taken to Communist leanings in New York, or that he did not affiliate closely enough with the virtues of the American Republic, his journal entries upon coming to the Capitol suggest that he was in touch with the significance of American history and its influence on his life and well being:

Late in the afternoon, after the outer doors had been closed and the public departed, I walked through the quiet halls of the capitol, alone in the solitude with the immortal fathers, with Gilbert Stuart’s Washington and Patrick Henry and Calhoun in the hall of the Vice Presidents, walking on red rugs, the blue tiles, stopping for a
moment before the polished door of the old Supreme Court, which long ago was
the senate, the exquisite room in which Calhoun and Clay and Webster delivered
their orations—they could have, they but even whispered. The spread eagle
watched for years over the head of the chief justice and in the white ceiling are the
stars. . . .

While in D.C. he joined the Press Club and became a leader within it. He entertained
friends, visited the museums and was attuned to breaking political events. He was in
touch with the President and First Lady and left impressive daily schedules, meeting in
one day, for example, with Cordell Hull, Jimmy Byrnes and several other influential
movers and shakers from the South. 87

During his time in D.C. Robertson wrote many unsigned pieces so it is difficult to
state with confidence that stories were actually published, but drafts preserved within
his papers continue to reveal his interest in freedom themes. For example, he seemed
impressed with the new Secretary of Labor, Miss Frances Perkins. He probably wrote
an extended Associated Press release about her, but his journal is sufficient notice of his
respect for her, especially her work ethic:

Soon after Green left, [a] Negro boy came by with a tray with a pot of tea, a strip of
lemon and two pieces of toast. “This is the secretary’s lunch,” said he.

“Doesn’t eat much does she?” said I.

“No, sir, she sure don’t.” said the waiter.

87 Ben Robertson, Personal Journal, Ben Robertson Papers.
Miss Perkins still works as hard as ever, rarely leaving her office before eight and nine and even ten o’clock in the evening.

He also noted her egalitarian values and her command of current labor issues:

One day Perkins told us about the plan the railroads and employees had drawn up to take care of persons losing jobs through technological unemployment, to pay them for time until they could tide over and find feet in other industries. She called this one of the most important things accomplished in America--recognizing the principle that the worker had some claim to his job, some equity.88

In addition, he appreciated how she honored the valiant struggles of the railroad employees as they sought greater freedoms for themselves and for all American workers in general.

While in D.C., Robertson also developed a biographical sketch of Thomas Kennedy, the International Secretary-Treasurer of the United Mine Workers of America. Undated and unpublished, it still reveals his appreciation for labor and its push for federal regulation, all the while insisting that these labor leaders were not radical Communists. They believed in capitalism but wanted the worker to have his or her fair share. According to Robertson’s sketch, Kennedy was elected as attorney general of the state of Pennsylvania, the first overwhelming Democratic majority victory in that state in forty years: “He ha[d] played a leading part in shaping the policies of the New Deal in Pennsylvania.” He added that Kennedy was one of the first

---

88 Ben Robertson, Biographical Sketch of Francis Perkins, Ben Robertson Papers.
to endorse Roosevelt for President and had been “a champion of him and the New Deal since 1930.” Robertson celebrated Kennedy’s accomplishments, noting as well that he came up from the ranks, had served his time within the mines, and was a lay leader within the Catholic Church. To Robertson, Kennedy probably compared favorably to Australia’s Scullin:

Long a champion of social justice, he has been and always will be an advocate of greater social justice and economic security for the people, so that this nation may be a better place in which to work and in which to live.89

Consistently, Robertson saw the freedom-extending efforts of labor leaders as helping not only labor but also the whole nation. After the stock market crash, he continued to emphasize economic security for all so that the nation in general would be a better place in which to work and live.

In the Foreword to the third edition of Robertson’s Red Hills and Cotton, historian Lacy Ford dwells on an allusion that Robertson made to the well-known labor leader, John L. Lewis; the allusion appeared within a speech Robertson delivered before patricians gathered in Charleston who hoped to hear him discuss political realities within the state. Robertson stood up for Lewis in front of a pretty tough constituency.90 Evidently, his Labor articles were not written just to fill columns but were based on his evolving understanding of what he believed the country must do to realize its errand.

---

89 Ben Robertson, Biographical Sketch of Thomas Kennedy, Ben Robertson Papers.

Labor needed a New Deal. In 1935 Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America. Robertson created a sketch for the wire services to use upon Lewis’ passing. Again, Robertson felt compelled to overemphasize that as a labor leader Lewis was not a radical or Communist but actually an American who was worthy of admiration:

In 1919 there came a big strike of 600,000 miners over wage and working conditions. Lewis directed the union cause until the federal government obtained a mandatory injunction from the United States district court in Indianapolis, directing cancellation of the strike as a national menace and giving the union 72 hours in which to comply.

There followed a 24 hours’ conference in the union headquarters, a few blocks from the federal building. Then on the morning of Armistice Day, Lewis announced the union decision in these words:

“Gentlemen, we will obey the mandate of the court. We do so under protest. We are Americans. We can not fight our government.”

On December 12 President Wilson publicly commended him for his action, citing him as a man of honor and a patriotic citizen.91

Lewis did what he thought was best for all parties involved— even the southern-born President Woodrow Wilson appreciated his efforts. Lewis diffused a difficult situation, refusing to press against a federal mandate. Having been bred in the South, Robertson had anticipated the counterarguments that would surface among his American readers as they considered Lewis’ contributions. Having the nod of Wilson would allay the

91 Ben Robertson, Biographical Sketch of John L. Lewis, Ben Robertson Papers.
fears of some. In addition, he noted that like Kennedy he rose from the ranks, served his constituency well, and even turned down powerful opportunities, remaining loyal to his labor base. He even went into some detail explaining that Lewis was instrumental in keeping coal production at an all time high during World War I, showing his commitment to America’s defense:

In world war years he was a member of the coal production committee of the national council of defense and when the United States fuel administration was formed he worked with that body to maintain a maximum flow of coal from the mines throughout the period of the conflict.92

Honoring the efforts of labor leaders was practically a kiss of death in terms of making a possible bid for South Carolina leadership when New South boosters were advertising cheap labor and no unions. What was it that Robertson was after? He did have some political ambitions, but he seemed unwilling to play power politics when it interfered with his evolving freedom quest. Here more than ever, Robertson seemed to be more of an American than a “would be” leader in the South. Yet, Robertson was not a working-class populist. He was more like a Progressive Conservative as South Carolina historian David Duncan Wallace portrayed Carolinians of the upcountry who would have included the Robertson family.93 All three of Robertson’s labor sketches, after all, appealed to foundational American values such as advancement through hard work,

92 Robertson, Biographical Sketch of John L. Lewis.

93 Wallace, South Carolina.
religious affiliation and community service. He may have had some comfort in moving closer to an identity more in tune with the values he associated with the Southern Cross and the American errand despite the problems it might have caused in terms of his standing in the South. Regardless, he made efforts to understand distant others, people with different backgrounds and abilities as he crafted these biographical sketches. At this early stage of his career, he thought about the rights and freedoms of diverse Americans, not just the preferences of dominant New South leaders who were opposed to enlarging the liberties of laborers.

After about ten years of serving as a roving reporter, Robertson returned to his home in Clemson, South Carolina to write and think. Since 1926 he had been working on an American settlement saga about his family that spanned several generations. According to some, he came home to finish this work that was published in 1938 as *Travelers’ Rest*. He also helped with the campaigns of a few New Deal candidates running for South Carolina leadership positions and covered some of these races for the *Anderson Independent*. In addition, he collected upcountry music and wrote about it.

Furthermore, he published articles in major magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post*. All of these efforts suggested in various ways that Robertson was still passionately invested in his freedom theme. At this point he was able to state more clearly what his freedom quest was all about. To a certain extent it seemed to be about an ongoing and eternal yearning within the human heart to be free to forge a spiritual home within the world, a place where people could fully express their talents and yearnings. At this point
he was also beginning to realize that this precious possibility to seek such spiritual freedom was about to be challenged yet again as Hitler launched his assaults.

Robertson’s *Travelers’ Rest* epic, when finally self-published in 1938, was an imaginative recreation of how his people, in fictional representations, journeyed into the continental wilderness in search of the Promised Land. It was a story about spiritually hungry American Protestant pilgrims who yearned to craft a home within the wilderness, a dwelling that was plain and dignified and sober and strong. They sought a place with abundant land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land that they could groom and honor and make truly sacred. That this was their American dream instead of just a spiritual or religious one, that it was a secular idyllic infused with spiritual and sacred meaning, is evident in the names of the three main sections of the epic: The Westerners, the Southerners, and the Americans. Yet, it was also a personal spiritual pilgrimage story as well, since Robertson continued to work at his own understanding of who he was as an American as excerpts from *Travelers’ Rest*’s Foreword reveal:

...I... began reading “Leaves of Grass.” It was then in faraway Java, engrossed in those lusty and delicate and living American pages, that I for the first time saw the vision of our people—the long dead line of our fathers, succeeding, failing, crying in the night, singing hymns and drinking, glorying in life, longing for death, “lovely death.” I saw them all moving through American time and the vast territories of American space, homesick themselves and lonely, an American exodus, a long westward search for a way of living, for spiritual rest. I heard the cry in the wilderness, the voice of anguish, which Americans have always known and
still know in their secret heart. It is the way of the wind for us, the winding road, the star.

And suddenly I saw myself, my own generation, and our place in America’s procession. We stood on a high hill in a peculiar position. For behind us, still in sight, lay the early valley of the past, and there ahead of us stretched another mighty valley—the field of the future. . .

. . . .I wanted to catch the glimpse I had of a plain family making its way in America—through the whole 300 years of the venture, changing as America changed, keeping the step, constantly renewing itself, finding new strength, and at the same time holding to its original belief, remembering still the dream. I wanted to show a group of Americans as they had been from the beginning, as their children were, as surely their children’s children would be—a people almost always living for the future. . .

. . . .I believe in the clarifying word of loneliness, it lies at the base of our national character. Emotion flowing through New World space has been my concern—the building up and handing on of an American attitude and in attempting to show this, I have tried deliberately to write a novel as though it were a mythical history. . . .for it is the procession that counts, the peculiar idiom and its mood, the costly national flower that blooms above the grave. It has been the cry,
living still, that I have tried to deal with, the love Americans always had had for
America, the long never ending search for a home.\textsuperscript{94}

Within \textit{Travelers’ Rest} Roberson revealed, indirectly, some of the struggles he had
had to work through as a scion of prosperous upcountry farmers who nonetheless saw
himself as an American on a wilderness errand. As he crafted the saga, he had to wrestle
with, for example, his Puritan-minded peoples’ decisions to purchase slaves. He had to
grapple with their decisions to secede from the Union that he and they had held dear,
and he had had to address his concerns with the encroaching industrialization and
modernization that was beginning to make his upcountry idyll impersonal. All of these
would be themes he continued to address and come back to in the midst of World War,
just a year later. As he stood upon Shakespeare’s Cliff, he reiterated his understanding
of America’s freedom errand.

\textit{Travelers’ Rest} is a three-part fictional saga of a proud and pious Pennsylvania
family that slowly treks down the Carolina Road before it finally establishes deep roots
within the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in South Carolina’s upcountry. The
story closely parallels the settlement pattern of the author’s Clayton relatives. Robertson
weaves a story that begins in early Colonial America. It then traces the fictional
Caldwell family’s trials with the Cherokee, their efforts during Revolutionary War, their
contributions toward building the new nation, their desires and efforts to strike out for
West, their decisions to buy into the labor system of the Low Country, their struggles

\textsuperscript{94} Ben Robertson, \textit{Travelers’ Rest} (Clemson, SC: Cotton Field Publishers, 1938) vii-ix.
during the Civil War and Reconstruction, as well as their adjustments to and revulsion toward encroaching industrialization. He tried to show how each generation built upon the former—how they tried to fashion a spiritual home within the wilderness but continually fell woefully short. Stephen John, the star scion within the last generation of the Caldwell clan, finally decided to pack his bags and head North in the late twenties with two of his African American kin. He enrolled at Harvard in hopes, perhaps, of reconnecting to America’s earliest understanding of her errand. The story ended with the sense that American spiritual travelers might find their rest deep within their imaginations as they commune within wilderness lands, lands like the nature preserve he finds beyond the city, a land that will be forever free, protected and open for those who seek it.

The scope of this thesis does not allow a close examination of Robertson’s novel, but a close reading of his treatment of just one of the spiritual trials of his people will highlight the general tenor of his American argument, his understanding of America’s freedom errand.

The author offered a fascinating take on the abominable practice of slavery that his upcountry fictional clan had chosen to embrace. The extended passage almost reads like a variation on the Hebraic story of Joseph, a story about a brother who was sold into slavery in Egypt in order for a larger good within God’s plan to unfold. In *Travelers’ Rest* Robertson narrated how one of the Caldwell patriarchs made his way down from the upcountry to Augusta in hopes of purchasing a slave or two for their new cotton propagation plan. He eventually comes back with a voluptuous and musically inclined
Queen Elizabeth who endeared herself, ultimately, to most of the family. What she brought with her was music—deep, soulful, spiritual music that beckoned the deepest yearnings of listeners. Through her God-given gift, she was eventually able to thaw the frozen hearts of some of the tale’s Puritan kin. She brought warmth to their stern Protestant community. A few passages capture the Queen’s magic:

It was at this time that Queen Elizabeth came to Forest Mansion. Tall and proud and black, she was standing in the old slave market in Augusta when Carter first saw her—an immense figure poised beside a white column. Among a group of frightened Negroes, cringing and uncertain, Queen Elizabeth loomed triumphant. Seemingly an ageless being, above destiny, she broke into fine singing when the time came for her to climb the block. Her shoulders were flung far back and very white in her jet face were wide eyes and brilliant teeth, “Lord” she said, “I’ll fall upon my knees and I’ll face the rising sun.” The fearless physical beauty and the courage of this black woman entranced Carter. At once he began bidding, raising the price higher and higher. After a quarter-hour of haggling, she was his. He had bought her.

He brought Queen Elizabeth to Keowee and in the same wagon also he brought some cotton seed. Without even suspecting it, Carter was fixing the seal upon the misty uplands. “Yes, Lord, hallelujah,” sang the Negro woman as northward rolled the wagon.”

The great figure of the Negro woman soon was familiar about the valley, she fitted readily into the scheme of things, and she brought with her a new spirit and a
strange new richness of the imagination as her contribution to the dour valley in which the Caldwells had settled. She told great stories of mysterious things and of magic. . . . The wilderness never was the same again after Queen Elizabeth.

Carter was surprised to learn how lightly she controlled the great emotions, the will and the conscience and all those involved problems, which gnawed at his own reason. Things were arranged simply for Queen Elizabeth—they were epic. To her the world was a hill, heaven was a hill, and between these two lay the fires of hell in a deep pit. The road she had to follow from the here to the hereafter was like a long tight rope, and onto this she ventured, a rope walker. She hung on as long as she could, then she fell off, got singed a little, and started over. Always the heart was willing with Queen Elizabeth, always the flesh was weak—that was the beginning and the end of human conduct. Yesterday was the long-buried past, tomorrow might never come—there was the living present. She never forgot that God was a merciful God. He would forgive her any time in the twinkling of an eye. So no matter what might face her, Queen Elizabeth was prepared, she was ready.95

As a self-professed and self-prepared intellectual historian of sorts, trying to sort out the American way, Robertson tried to explain how Queen Elizabeth had through her previous enslavements in the New World embodied Puritan or Calvinistic values along with some of its songs that she made richer with her own cultural traditions and unique

gifts. She had a sense of sin that even Jonathan Edwards would have praised. Her understanding of moral life, her balancing act upon the tightrope, was almost like Edwards’ sinners in the hands of an angry God. She had to be vigilant. Robertson was perhaps suggesting that some African Americans like Queen Elizabeth had bought into what he perceived to be a universal and epic understanding of a spiritual quest and were about the task of slowly freeing themselves. It gave them strength as it would for Martin Luther King, Jr. just a decade or so after Robertson’s passing.

Robertson also seemed to suggest that Queen Elizabeth had brought a new vitality to the community. She still held some of her traditional beliefs in magic and ghosts and magical remedies as other passages revealed, but she felt comfortable, too, with her adopted faith. She was somehow freer. Robertson was already beginning to write about how upcountry music was a fine blending of Gospel with the blue note of the “Negro” people and that the blues and jazz music of America was a rich synthesis of the two.96 In this fictional account, he represented “the marriage” of the two cultures in Queen Elizabeth’s love affair with the Caldwell patriarch and in the spread of her loving spirit among her own offspring and those within the fictional Caldwell’s white family line. The author embraced the contributions of both heritages within the upcountry to the extent that they furthered the wilderness errand, to the extent that they made life a bit freer for all among them.

96 Bailey, “Broadcasting and Preserving Upcountry Music.”
Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, Edmund Morgan, Sacvan Bercovitch, Gordon Wood and others have thought about the nature of America’s wilderness errand. Within their studies they contend that the literal and figurative wilderness that John Winthrop alluded to in his New World sermon has evolved throughout America’s intellectual and literary tradition into a mythical understanding of the wilderness as a great crucible in which Americans can test their spiritual strengths and resolve. Far from a howling wasteland, the wilderness is an arena in which a diverse spiritual people seek together a freer way of living and being. The wilderness, as Winthrop suggested from the beginning, harkened back to the Hebraic scriptures of a people struggling to be free, a people who hoped to find their solace and salvation in a covenant community that was searching, in a teleological way, for a future, freer way. Freedom was at the heart of the wilderness errand, as Robertson understood.  

---

Perhaps Robertson’s effort to preserve upcountry music was, in part, an effort to honor the freedom yearnings of his upcountry, wilderness people. He seemed to think that when community members were singing together they were at times expressing their deepest spiritual leanings, they were, in a way, becoming the blessed community, they were a bit freer. In his “Cotton Country Singing” article that was submitted for publication to the *New York Times*, he honored the everyday efforts of thousands of upcountry residents who engaged in a regional ritual of “all day singings.” 

Robertson was trying to tap the strengths of his community as he wrote about it and discovered its treasures. He even suggested in one version of this article on upcountry singing, that Lady Roosevelt was honoring comparable regional efforts as she had invited Appalachian fiddlers to the capitol and had encouraged their yearly conventions. 

Around this time, he also invited John Lomax to come to Clemson to record as part of his Works Progress Administration efforts the gospel songs of the colored community and the singing groups from various mill village churches. These recordings are now available on the Library of Congress’ *American Memory* website. Within the article submitted to the *New York Times*, Robertson suggested several key points that related

---


100 Bailey, “Broadcasting and Preserving Upcountry Music.”
directly to his understanding of the American errand. He definitely tried to emphasize the democratic or egalitarian nature of the all day singings:

These all-day singings are among the most democratic music affairs now being held in the United States. Anybody who wants to sing a solo can do so once, and any trio or quartet can have one chance on the platform. All any group has to do is to ask the professor who presides if it may sing and the professor says “Sure.” As a result some of the singing is pretty terrible but the audience is patient. But a lot of the performances are of a high order for this type of singing, and the audiences thoroughly recognize competence.101

He also wanted readers to know that this was a regional variation of a larger stream of American singing that drew on favorite hymns within many Protestant churches:

The singings which these Carolinians hold are among the oldest music festivals in America, many of them having met annually, more or less, since the Wesley revival swept the upcountry in the early 1800’s. . . .

These singers really belong in the main stream of native American music, for their tradition goes far back and includes much, but little has been written of their present day gatherings, for the singers themselves regard their festivals as naturally as they regard the movies. . . .

Lately, they have revived many very old hymns--“Canaan Land,” “The Beautiful Land of the Soul,” “When Our Work Here Is Done and Our Last Crown Is Won.” They have returned to an ancient tune of “Rock of Ages” that few singers of the uptown churches have ever heard, and they also have returned to their great-grandfather’s way of singing “How Firm a Foundation.”

Equally important, he emphasized that these yearly all day singings on Sundays in August when the cotton had been laid by had dignity. They stemmed from a long and reputable tradition, the audiences respected the singers, and the gatherings helped folks with their spiritual pilgrimages:

There is a moving lilt and spirit about these gatherings. . . .

C.C. Adams, a tombstone-laundry man of Seneca, S.C., is the tireless president of the South Carolina Singing Convention, and he often tells on his visits to local congregations, “I was born a poor boy on a farm and I know what singing means to the folks.”

Again, Robertson honored the efforts of everyday Americans as they tried to remain true to their national errand into the wilderness, their understanding that they somehow needed to be about the task of crafting strengthening communities for self and others despite all the unknowns, ones that were welcoming and supportive and beyond their immediate church families. He, too, realized that people needed to sing, to have places where their spiritual selves could be recognized.

---

102 Robertson, “Cotton Country Sings.”

103 Robertson, “Cotton Country Sings.”
Yet, even as he collected these spirituals and revised his epic pilgrimage story, Robertson knew that the freedoms his people had somehow been able to preserve despite their costly mistakes and sinful ways were deeply threatened. Just before he came home from D.C., Robertson was sent to London to cover the 1935 Naval Conference.\textsuperscript{104} While there, he realized as his notes to friends made clear that Wilson’s hopes for a League of Nations were all but dashed. Fascists were disregarding the Treaty of Versailles, one that Robertson felt was way too harsh toward the Germans in the first place. He knew the peace he felt in the upcountry was fleeting. His “King George Strives to Please,” his article within the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} in 1939, more than hinted at this. Why would a King of England ever try to please the former “revolting” Americans? He knew full well that the King would need America’s help in the months to come as Germany continued her assaults.

For about twelve years, Robertson wrote articles for everyday people in public forums such as newspapers, journals and magazines. He also tried his hand at a fictional saga of an American family searching for a spiritual home. When Robertson finally climbed to the top of Shakespeare’s Cliff in August of 1940, he knew for what he was standing. He would share that realization in various ways throughout his coverage of World War II as he invited other Americans to think, as well, about their errand into the great unknown where their spiritual strengths would be tested.

\textsuperscript{104} Ben Robertson, “King George Strives to Please,” \textit{Saturday Evening Post} 4 Feb (1939): 5-7.
As Hitler’s blitzkrieg plowed through Europe, Ben Robertson volunteered as a U.S. war correspondent. By February of 1940 he was assigned to work within the London office of a liberal-leaning and progressive New York daily called PM that stood for “Picture Magazine.” PM’s publisher, Ralph Ingersoll, who had worked with the New Yorker, wanted to deliver news that did not conform to advertisers’ slants. He was willing to take this financial risk, in part, since he had private backing from the likes of Marshall Field III. He would be far freer to share news and views because PM did not use advertisements that, of course, could bind it to certain perspectives or stories. For Ingersoll, the idea was to develop a user-friendly paper with many high quality photographs. The motto for PM—alluded to in this thesis’ introduction—was that it did not like big people who liked to push little people around. This not so implicit mission was related to fighting fascism at home and abroad. Robertson embraced such a vision. He had written on behalf of the oppressed for years: the Hawaiians without representation; Molly Jackson and the Appalachian coal-miners, U.S. laborers, women like Francis Perkins, upcountry mill workers, tenants and farmers, and “Negroes” whom he considered part of America’s extended family and very much a part of his upcountry family.

By reading Robertson’s stories in PM, subscribers could get a feel for the everyday people of Plymouth, Dover, London, Coventry, and other regions within Great Britain.

---

105 Promotional Subscription Materials for PM, 1940, Wright Bryan Papers.
as they prepared for and endured thousands of Luftwaffe bombings. In his early writings, from about June of 1940 until about January of 1941, Robertson would do what he could within his profession to showcase what he considered the valiant efforts of every day English citizens as they began to rethink who they were in the midst of this epic life and death battle. An analysis of a selection of his writings will offer insights into his growing understanding of freedom as he began to observe and interact with the English and as he constantly compared their collective spirit to the spirit of Americans down through their more recent history. He also used his close observations of the English people to guide Americans as they reconsidered their commitment to preserving basic human rights throughout the world. Should they lend a hand to people in a distant land who were fighting for basic human freedoms? Robertson posed this question indirectly but consistently. For purposes of this thesis, the review is limited to his early coverage of the Battle of Britain, but his later writings became even more focused in their efforts to encourage freedoms throughout the world—in places such as India, Burma and China.

One of Robertson’s first signed pieces for *PM* was “Evacuees Streaming Northward from England’s Threatened Zone: Government Encourages Mass Movement, Has Learned Lesson From French Tragedy.” This article suggested opportunities for Americans to get involved in the freedom struggle. As an initial step, they could begin by giving English youngsters safe haven:

Wednesday, July 3, 1940

News From Abroad
Evacuees Streaming Northward From England’s Threatened Zone

Government Encourages Mass Movement, Has Learned Lesson From French Tragedy

Special Correspondence

LONDON July 3 – The mass moving of people within England’s island fortress goes on daily. Every train into London from the south brings in women and children evacuees, and every train to the north and west takes these and others away.

These war travelers dressed in cool summer clothes pour through the gates of London stations with gas masks, dolls, picture books, small handbags and small wicker baskets bound with straps.

Most of them travel light bringing with them only what they can carry in their hands. Some of the mothers look rather tired, but children appear extremely interested and alert. Full of the excitement of new experience, these small groups bound for Wales and Scotland—some even for the U.S. and Canada often stop in the stations to rest and to eat sandwiches and fruit they bring with them. Then they head on checking out for another train.

Migration is Mandatory

Their migration so far is entirely voluntary, although the government encourages the movements of mothers to safer zones. The government is naturally anxious to save as many lives as possible when the battle for England begins and the military authorities have learned, too, that in France
the civilian population locked the traffic behind the combat lines. They are further aware that soldiers fight better when they know that their families are secure.

The Ministry of Health has estimated that half a million children of school age have been evacuated from southeast England, Southampton, Portsmouth and Gosport. 4,000 more are leaving London tomorrow. Three thousand children of school age still remain in London because parents have not yet consented to their removal.

Landlord Paid

For each school child the government pays some country landlord from $1.70 to $3 a week, depending upon the child’s age. Parents are expected to clothe and shoe them where financially possible, and in addition—if able to pay—must contribute from 20 cents and $1.20 each week. According to the ability of the parent to pay, the government requires each child to take a gas mask, a national registration certificate and a food card, and suggests a complete change of clothes from socks to nightshirt, a toothbrush, comb, towel, washrag, cakes of soap, handkerchiefs, and a warm coat.

The government has found that the children, once over their first bout of homesickness, bear separation better than their parents. Families, however, are enduring the situation with courage and even with humor. A cartoon in one London newspaper today shows a very small English child saying to a very large English butler: “If anyone calls Jenkins, I have gone to Canada.”
Thousands of English youngsters like these shown in the evacuation of London should be given refuge in the United States, Major Albert Braithwaite, Conservative, told the House of Commons. The United States, he said, “must immediately come to England’s rescue by sending their fleet and boats to take away our women and children if they desire to see England obtain those elements of strength that will preserve civilization. There have been no official offers of an American refuge as yet,” he said.\(^\text{106}\)

In early August Robertson helped one of his friends, the renowned Hilda Marchant, a first rate, London-based British correspondent who worked for the *Daily Mail*. He was able to enable her young nephew, Leslie Collins, to find comfort in America. Robertson’s friend back home, Jeanne Gadsden, agreed to care for the young boy. To encourage others to respond to this urgent appeal for help, Wright Bryan, Robertson’s friend from Clemson College, featured Jeanne Gadsden’s efforts in the *Atlanta Constitution*.\(^\text{107}\) Clearly, Robertson was invested in the effort and did what he could within the constraints of ethical reporting to encourage conscientious Americans to consider the plea coming from the House of Commons long before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Americans needed to help if they wanted to preserve Western freedom, and he jumped in and helped as best he could. He did not merely write about this legal form of

\(^\text{106}\) Ben Robertson, “Evacuees Streaming Northward From England’s Threatened Zone,” *PM* 3 July 1940, Ben Robertson Papers.

\(^\text{107}\) Clipping of article in *Atlanta Constitution*, Wright Bryan Papers.
assistance—he helped make it happen.

Upon his return to the United States in late December of 1940, when the bombing was letting up a bit for the first time since August, Robertson agreed to participate in an interview with Ralph Ingersoll that was designed to call into question the errand of one of America’s foremost representatives. Robertson shared openly his concerns about Ambassador Joseph Kennedy. Robertson was willing to call one of America’s leaders back to what he considered America’s fundamental moral purpose and errand and did so quite defiantly. This published interview, insightful because it was conducted by a seasoned interviewer in Ingersoll, is a rare glimpse into the mind of Ben Robertson. We also get to see how Robertson took a stand against an American leader who did not seem to embrace the freedom-loving ideals that he found to be essential to the American way. He put himself out there in a critical time in America’s history. Because of the length of this vitally important primary source, it is included as Appendix A.

Home from the front, Robertson was relentless. He did not hold back. He was full of moral outrage. This was Robertson at his most vitriolic and over what? Over an American representative not doing his job, not representing America as a dedicated patriot and believer in the founding ideas. Fed up, Robertson cared enough to take a stand. He was fearless. In summary, he strongly suggested that Ambassador Joseph Kennedy had a few redeeming virtues. He helped the journalists get passes and made sure they were fairly safe. Yet, he consistently suggested that the British could not take it. He did not believe they could stand up to Hitler. In addition, Robertson suggested that Kennedy was more interested in protecting his own financial investments than in
the moral freedom struggle. He also added that Kennedy would send mixed messages.

This interview is critically important in terms of revealing Robertson’s understanding of America’s investment in this freedom struggle. Robertson was committed to the spiritual dimensions of the freedom fight. He was beginning to see the English people that Americans had rarely seen in the popular press, people who were willing to fight for freedom, who were willing to risk their homes, cathedrals and lives for cherished ideals as he had shared in other recent articles. Here we see more than ever the fighter. Robertson could not believe what Kennedy, America’s appointed representative, was about. He was upset that he was using his position to protect his private financial investments. This was anathema to an American errand pilgrim who saw the struggle as a spiritual one of epic proportions. Robertson was more than a reporter, and his innovative PM championed such efforts since it made its bias blatantly clear from the beginning. PM was a paper that was committed to fighting bullies in America and abroad. Robertson was a servant to the American public, an unofficial ambassador of what the U.S. Senate considered to be their truer American identity. He was willing to suffer possible and intense political repercussions in an effort to share the news with the American public. He perhaps hoped the President would appoint an ambassador that did represent the values Robertson and PM and many other Americans in tune with the errand espoused. Robertson was not just a gung-ho patriotic zealot for any old American way. He believed American had a moral obligation to protect basic American freedoms.

With this burden lifted from his chest, Robertson returned home to Fort Hill for the
holidays. While there he offered a series of ten *PM* articles that began to appear in mid-January of 1941. They offered a less censored sense of what he thought was truly unfolding in England. The first excerpt is from an article that shared Robertson’s perspective on two major British leaders during the time—the Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the Labor Leader Ernest Bevin:


*This is the second of a series of uncensored articles on the situation in Britain by Ben Robertson, Jr., who has been PM’s correspondent in London for the past six months. Mr. Robertson, fresh from the air blitzkrieg on England, has just returned to the U.S.A.*

“What is the Real Situation?”

On coming home from six tremendous months in England, I am asked by almost everybody I see, “What is the real situation now in Britain?” Practically everybody seems anxious to talk to someone—to anyone—who has just come back from the battle, and when I ask them what do they mean by “the real situation,” I find they want to know how Churchill is standing the strain, how Bevin is getting along, what was Kennedy like in London, how is production keeping up?

Is it true that the rich can still buy luxurious food in spite of rationing, is the class system really breaking down, what happens when the water gives out, do
people ever get used to bombing, can they really sleep?—on and on, the questions pour. Is the shelter situation getting any better, is there danger of epidemics, can British morale last, what about the censor?

I will try to answer some of these questions as the various situations appeared to me the first of this year.

About the Prime Minister—he seems to be one of those men like President Roosevelt who thrive on crises. He can work 17 and 18 hours a day, day on end, and with the greatest problems in the world revolving about him, he also can relax. He can go away to the country for a day or so, as the President goes to Hyde Park, and he can be as carefree as anybody on those occasions.

Time Off for Movies

Just before Christmas he took time off to see the whole of Gone with the Wind and when it was finished he said he had been reduced to a pulp, that he hadn’t a bone left in his body; he said thank God he could get back to his own war. Recently he saw a private showing of The Great Dictator and he thought it was wonderful—especially as a public speaker he liked Chaplin’s long oration. Mr. Churchill admired that as a politician.

One evening he and his close friends had community singing in the parlor and the Prime Minister sang When that Midnight Chu-chu Leaves for Alabam. He listened for a long time to an album of records of the Southernaires, a group of American Negro singers—he listened to Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen and Steal Away with Jesus.
The Prime Minister still is continuing his role of putting into words the feelings of the British people—he still is their inspiration and their hope as well as their political leader.

Like a real writer, he searches for words and he is always jotting down ideas and expressions—even in the bathroom, he composes speeches. His health is good, and like the President, the Prime Minister enjoys his power. He enjoys his great role all the more since for so many years he was denied it. He is England’s war leader—many people are saying he will be too Tory for the peace. Some Englishmen say he has been so busy running the war he hasn’t had time to be Prime Minister.

How is Labor Minister Ernest Bevin doing? As hefty as ever, and increasing his influence every day with the voters. People argue a lot in England these days whether Bevin would succeed Churchill if anything were to happen to the P. M. Some think so, some think another Tory would have to set in—that Bevin will not become the next Prime Minister but the one after that. Their argument is that the British haven’t known Bevin long enough yet to trust him at Downing Street; they say Bevin is about where Lloyd George was in 1911.

Bevin lives at the Strand Palace Hotel, has a quality of ponderousness and agility that makes you think of John L. Lewis. Bevin when he sits down looks like a sitting Buddha. The Tories still are afraid of him and their line of attack is to say he is interested more in raising wages for the workers than he is in the broader problems of England. Bevin in the meantime is making use of Lincoln’s
motto—is learning to labor and to wait.\textsuperscript{108}

This “uncensored” article is revealing in many respects.\textsuperscript{109} Robertson shared the kinds of questions that were upon the minds of the curious, reading public. He then offered some intimate insights about Winston Churchill, the man of the hour who would eventually receive honorary American citizenship. Very few reporters were able to have such intimate contact with the all powerful P.M. Yet, true to his own freedom search, Robertson revealed ever so subtly that he was still the valiant American public servant from America’s South. Throughout his last years of service, he did what he could while among the British to spread the changing spirit within his southern region. He first noted Churchill’s assessment of \textit{Gone with the Wind}. Ever the politician rallying for American support, Churchill let his sympathies for the American South be known (or to Robertson at least, whom he courted as he did all American reporters). He evidently felt the proud Confederacy’s suffering and utter defeat, so much so that the burdens before him seemed a bit easier to bear. He also knew that Mitchell had contributed some aid for mobile canteens, but the P.M. in no way suggested that he respected the sense of the film’s “moonlight and magnolias” tilt.

Then, Robertson, the accomplished jazz pianist and lover of his people’s music,


\textsuperscript{109} Almost any published newspaper article is censored to a certain extent. For example, within \textit{PM}, Robertson could not write from the perspective of a bigoted Southern racist. Although he was writing within the United States, he still could not reveal military secrets or share details that would put citizens in harm’s way.
used his intimate social time with Churchill to lead the Prime Minister and his friends in a few rounds of community singing. The blurred image within the *PM* article suggested that Robertson was at the piano, perhaps when Churchill sang *When that Midnight Chu-chu Leaves for Alabam*. The gathered then listened to the voices of the Southernaires, a group of American African American singers who offered *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen* and *Steal Away with Jesus*. Robertson, ever the trickster that his childhood mentor, Windy Bill, would have respected, honored the people he wanted to help in a sly way. He literally carried their music with him across the Atlantic and into Churchill’s private parlour. The Social Gospel messages that Robertson was exposed to within his youth seem to have been embodied in this international communal moment as he combined his role as a public servant with an abiding respect for a progressive Christianity that insisted that God’s will could be done through the collective efforts of people of good will. With quite a bit of creativity and intentionality, Robertson helped Churchill see that his people, his Southern African American people, could help him in his country’s darkest hour. After all, his Southern people, black and white, knew about suffering. They also knew about the freeing power of song. Their songs had helped people throughout the world with their soul-stirring sounds and lyrics.

Finally, then, Robertson explained how the Labor Leader Bevin might even be a contender as the next Prime Minister. He had hope that England was changing, that the working people would have their say, just as he hoped a better day might be ahead for every, everyday American. He even gave a nod to America’s labor leader,
John Lewis in his apt analogy.

Another article within this same series, published on January 28, 1941, offered Robertson’s personal assessment of the situation in England:

The British Can Win

Ben Robertson, Jr.

Tuesday, January 28th 1941

London Took Inspiration From Madrid

Now Britain Can Handle Any Defensive Situation

This is the 8th of a series of how England is fighting the war by Ben Robertson, Jr., our London correspondent, who is here for a brief stay.

I flew to England in June when all the democratic world seemed flying and I took with me the instructions which all American journalists are trusted with whenever they are sent from home—always to remember I was abroad in the physical sense only, that I was an American sent off to cover a foreign situation for the information of Americans who stayed at home. I was told that I was to be factual and non-biased and that if I had any pre-set notions about Britain’s fighting ability or its lack of fighting ability I was to forget them; that I was to pick up the slate as of the day I got there.

Since June this British assignment has brought to me and the other American journalists in London five enormous situations.

We watched the British people meet a gigantic crisis. With them we waited for an invasion, which so far has still to develop. We followed the start and
failure of the first German air assaults. We learned that the British cities could stand up physically to bombings. We learned that the British in the midst of air battles could learn to sleep and to keep on working—they could maintain and even increase their domestic production. We discovered that England could take it—that was the fact that we found over there, and so we reported.

In June when we landed in England, the British were still in their darkest hour. They had brought home their army from Dunkirk, but even that brilliant success was retreat—it was a glorious end to failure. Britain in June had no friend left anywhere except America, and even in America most people were desperately discouraged. What astonished me on reaching England at the critical moment was to find how utterly undefeated the spirit of the British people was.

Hope Follows Despair

They told me they had gone through a period of the most utter despair when Paris had fallen and that after that they had said to themselves, “Well, we have only ourselves to depend on now—we know where we stand.” For some typically British reason this knowledge of being alone seemed to inspire every Englishman. The English kept their courage. Even the defeated army, once it was back on British soil, found it had kept its sense of inner strength—the British soldiers from Flanders were the most unbeaten army I ever heard of. The soldiers said actually they thought they had been doing all right in France. They thought they were getting along fine when suddenly they got word to retreat and to be ready to fire at an angle of practically 180 degrees. They talked about rear
guard actions and about how bravely thousands of Scots had died. Even with retreat, the British soldiers in England gave no indication of feeling inferior in any way to the Germans.

British Discover Themselves

It was pathetic in those days to see how little the British were equipped with. Their backs were to the wall and they knew it, but they were going to make their stand—with shotguns. Suddenly they realized who they were and what England meant to them. Actually they had discovered for themselves the living meaning of what they had been reading in the British history books all their lives—that it was better to die than to lose freedom. We watched them and listened to them. We heard they had asked Canada to send over every gun and every round of ammunition, to send over even the training planes from the Canadian training stations. I remember one day hearing a Cabinet minister say that a certain day was one of the most momentous in the history of the war—an entire shipload of rifles had come in from the United States.

What impressed me at the time was the way the plain working people were facing England’s situation. The re-organized government was working desperately, but even more determined was the work of the people. It might have been a futile gesture, but just the same every Englishman seemed to identify himself personally with the state—each one of them considered himself England. All of them began to do something; they formed volunteer companies of home guards, they drilled themselves and formed voluntary fire brigades and
they joined the ambulance and air raid rescue squads.

An old woman in the Labor Party—she lived in Lambeth in one of the poorest districts in London—told me her neighborhood had taken great heart since Mr. Churchill had said Londoners would defend the city street by street. She said the working people of Madrid were London’s inspiration, that laborers in the Spanish city had stood up to fire better than conscripted armies in Poland and France, and that what Madrid could do London could do. People put up signs by their doors with quotations from Shakespeare’s lines about “This England.”

Gradually, we began to realize that England had a people equal in spirit to any generation of Englishman that had ever lived. They were Elizabethan. In this crisis, we saw them ready to give up everything for their cause—they were ready to lose property and their lives. They had discovered that war was not as bad as the fear of war. From then on, we were for them. The fact as we saw it was that they were infinitely worth helping. That was also reported.

All through July and into August and September, we watched the British wait for an enemy to make a first landing in 800 years on England. We saw the British digging ditches in fields and putting up barricades from one end of the island to the other—every town and village was getting ready. Even the women had their plans to fight parachutists. Next came the German air attacks by day, then by night, and we have told that story time and again.

The situation at present, we believe from the facts, is that Britain can handle
any defensive situation, but even before Mr. Churchill spoke in Glasgow there was no illusion about the future among the British people. They have known for a long time that a hard prolonged war lies ahead and that its outcome finally will depend on the help England can get from the United States.

Taking the Long View

They must blockade a continent, bring in food and materials. They must fight a war with 40,000,000 islanders against 80,000,000 on a continent. On their credit side, it must be noted that their morale is excellent, they are united, and they are taking the long time view. They are working overtime—stevedores, farmers, truck drivers, munitions workers, workers in airplane factories, and in shipyards. In six months, they have so improved their position that our own military attaches say now that the British can turn back any German try at invasion.

But in the long run, the British must do more than repel; somehow they must attack. But before that distant day arrives they must have the enormous equipment, which only we can get to them. I believe the British will win this war if we wish them to win it. I believe the Britons are standing between us and Hitler’s economics—I even believe we are able to attend theaters and ball games in America because British airmen are dying. I believe the lights are turned on tonight in New York and Washington because men and women are willing to be bombed in London and Cardiff and Bristol. The British are fighting for themselves, I know, but that does not make smaller the fact that they are also
fighting our battle.

Tomorrow: Ben Robertson will discuss Ireland and its wartime relations with Britain.¹¹⁰

The key within this less censored writing is that Robertson stated quite openly that he thought the British were fighting America’s freedom fight, that Americans were going to plays and playing ball, at the expense of the British—not a politically correct message to send to readers who might be offended by such a frontal attack. He was hitting them quite hard but he felt compelled to share the truth as he saw it. He made readers think about who they were as errand people. He used his understanding of history, politics, military strategy and observations to build his arguments. Vintage Robertson.

Robertson’s daily *PM* accounts, his many letters home, his memories, then, became fodder for what became his eye-witness account, *I Saw England*, that was published by both Reyerson, a British press that circulated in Canada in 1941, and then by America’s Knopf (1941) in lightning speed since its content was so critical for American policy makers and concerned citizens. It also made its way in adapted form to *Reader’s Digest* (1941) months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Still, he had a bit of distance from the Blitz by the time he began to write while at home from January to February of 1941. He was still writing to influence Americans with civic, freedom-

loving hearts and with those who were undecided. With this longer, less-censored story, he also had more room to share his own evolving identity.

Despite his belief in America’s abiding spirit, Robertson knew his audience by this point. He knew their questions and had given them answers. He also knew that his American readers, no matter how committed they might have been to America’s errand, were not too keen on entering another world war. He was also writing to Americans who remembered colonial imperialism as well. Still, Robertson tried to help readers see the spiritual dimensions of this complicated struggle as he himself tried to sort it all out. How could he help Americans think about entering a spiritual struggle to preserve taken-for-granted freedoms? Free from the censors and from the constraints of PM while covering a war, he could share more fully his own subjectivity, his own beliefs about who he was and how he grew to respect the English in their darkest, finest hour.

For starters, Robertson chose to write in first person and shared his own struggles in coming to terms with the English and their situation. *I Saw England* begins with Robertson retelling the story of his trip across the Atlantic. Right up front, he let his readers feel his discomfort in the night air high above the ocean, a feeling that arose because he “belonged to the land, to farms and fields and cities.” Robertson confessed that as he flew he worried about many things. France was falling. England might be next. He let it be known that he was of Wilson’s generation and from Wilson’s neck of the woods and that he knew the “bitterness and disillusion” that war brings, that

---

he respected, in part, America’s isolationist perspective, but that he was flying into a war zone, all the same, as a U.S. war correspondent—a servant without arms. He had signed on voluntarily at thirty-seven years of age. He also had reservations about bearing arms against other human beings as well, and he revealed this moral dilemma. In addition, he considered the kind of world peace that a League of Nations had once imagined. Robertson confessed: he was troubled. When he finally landed in England “they brought out cups and a big pot of tea. ‘My God,’ I said to myself, ‘What a war! My God, they’ll be defeated!’”\(^{112}\) He had to let readers know that he, like they, had had real doubts.

Robertson continued, not as an outsider exactly, but as an empathetic participant. He found himself becoming connected to this struggling country and shared that feeling up front: “It was a fine June day with the sun shining and I walked and watched and had a hard time to keep from weeping. I knew what it would mean to me if this city were my city—I should hardly be able to bear it.”\(^{113}\) He then noted several citizens who were not thinking of serving tea but who were braced for the challenge:

I saw a soldier on his knees, a rifle slung over his shoulder. The sight of this man took me home, and in a single flashing thought I was closer to Massachusetts than I had ever been before. I knew for the first time what it really meant to be Pilgrim—I understood what it meant to take up a rifle and make your way to


church.\textsuperscript{114}

This young man was praying before he ventured forth into the unknown, knowing full well he might have to take a life or lose his own to preserve his spiritual freedoms. Robertson was connecting yet again with what it meant to be a Pilgrim, to be willing to fight for your spiritual freedoms—odd as this seems. Increasingly, Robertson felt London was changing her tune: “London, the glittering, cold city that we had always known as tourists, had become a friendly and intimate town. London facing destruction and death had turned plain and simple.”\textsuperscript{115} Here, Robertson was continuing to drum the notion that many of the everyday people of London were of the same stock as American Pilgrims and Puritans— that they possessed the values he had emphasized in \textit{Travelers’ Rest}. They had become “plain and simple.”\textsuperscript{116}

Then, before Robertson went into his story of the English people, he revealed a bit of his Southern American heritage as he offered a two-page hospitality scene in which he described how he was welcomed onto this troubled island by fellow Southern Americans who were connected to the American Embassy and who were on the forefront of this epic battle—they did not pack up and leave as did so many other

---

\textsuperscript{114} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 15-16. About 9 months later, Robertson wrote in his personal journal about his Easter in Cardiff, Wales. He worshipped in a Baptist church there and again alluded to the soldiers who had their guns with them in church. He again stated in more specific terms that he was beginning to understand what it must have been like for the colonists in Massachusetts Bay in 1620 as they sought to realize their spiritual errand within the wilderness. They trusted in God but still had their barrels loaded (for additional protection).

\textsuperscript{115} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 17.

\textsuperscript{116} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 17.
Americans more interested in security:

[I] soon was reporting to a girl who had one of the oddest accents I had ever heard—a weird mixture of Southern American and British. Afterwards in London I got to know this girl very well; her name was Zenobia Forster-Brown and she had a sister Virginia, and their father was a British mining engineer and their mother was a Georgian—the former Louise duPont of Savannah. Mrs. Forster-Brown, the mother, had not been back to Georgia in twenty-five years, not since her marriage; she could not bear to go back, she explained, for she would never be able to leave again once she returned there. She didn’t dare go back, she said, so she had brought Savannah with her—she had continued to talk Southern, had brought over a Georgia mammy to raise her children, had taught them to talk Georgian [Southern American Georgian]. She called Zenobia “Baby” and Virginia “Honey.” That morning at the Embassy, Baby said to me: “What do you think, we have never been home; Ah reckon now we won’t be going home until after the wah.” One day Baby phoned me to come to the Forster-Brown house in Chester Square to dinner and she said: “Mamma says do you want fried chicken or do you want smothered chicken, and do you want hot biscuits or corn bread.” I said I wanted fried chicken and biscuits. Not only was I served fried chicken and biscuits, but in the middle of London in the middle of the war I also was served sweet potatoes—the last ones left at Selfridge’s store—and I was served rice, Southern cream gravy, and caramel layer cake. The former Prime Minister of Canada, Mr. Bennett, was also a guest at that dinner, and a London lady called Mrs. Primrose said: “Mr Prime Minister, did you ever see such an all-American dinner?” Mr. Bennett’s answer was: “Not quite so all-American.” Mrs. Forster-Brown said to me: “It’s very hard in London to
find anyone who can boil rice."

Our hostess then explained to us why the house was so bare. The furniture had been moved to a safe place in Wales.

"Mamma," said Baby, "tell them about the furniture."

"The furniture," said Mrs. Forster-Brown, "came from my mother’s house in Savannah. It originally was at Isle of Hope Plantation, Coffee County, Georgia, and it was evacuated from there when Sherman came through with his army. Now we have evacuated it from London."

"It cost two hundred pounds to move it too," said Major Forster-Brown from the other end of the table, "and I hope this time it gets bombed."117

From this brief excerpt readers learned a bit about Southern Americans abroad and at work on the world stage as they also learned more about their writer. Inviting his readers in, Robertson waxed. He brought in the whole Southern American hospitality tradition, complete with Southern euphemisms. Once Robertson had been identified as a Southern American abroad, he had been welcomed and invited to dinner by Zenobia, a Southerner still. He was invited not just to dinner about town but to her family’s home. Readers also realized, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, that at least a few Southern Americans had been living in England for a while but instead of becoming totally socialized into the British mainstream, they, as Robertson would do, had transplanted their Southern American ways into this new locale—as a bit of fresh air. They brought with them and preserved their Southern American child rearing

practices, their foods, their accent, their furniture, their verbal expressions, their ways of living, their history, and their charitable values. These Southern Americans were still Southern Americans after twenty-five years of living abroad—and with no visits back to the states. They had character, and they were serving as unofficial American ambassadors as they worked in and around the Embassy. In addition, readers, with Robertson’s help, began to realize that Southern Americans had influential positions in England, a shock to many who had perhaps cast the American South as the “Sahara of Bozarts” in good Menckenian style. Zenobia, though young, was employed at the American Embassy, and her mother, a du Pont from Savannah, Georgia, entertained Prime Ministers. Southern Americans, he suggested, were connected in American political circles—a new revelation for some of his American readers perhaps.

Robertson also made the point that Canada’s Prime Minister Bennett had never met a family that was quite so American. Robertson wanted to emphasize that this observer from a nearby country saw this Southern American meal as a very American meal. He wanted to cast Southern Americans as being at the heart of the American democratic experience instead of being “unreconstructed” or “America’s Number 1 Economic Problem.” More importantly, he suggested that Americans, even Southern Americans, could be a part of a global community and still remain American. As an international reporter for years and with Dean Walter Williams’ World Congress Journalism Creed, he had believed that he and other Americans should be about encouraging freedom and equality throughout the world. And here other Southern Americans, not just him alone, were trying to work toward that end while abroad. They did not want tyranny. When many Americans were fleeing, these Southern Americans, at
least, were in for the duration of the freedom fight.

After registering in the Embassy, Robertson went upstairs to visit Ambassador Joe Kennedy. Kennedy, knowing Robertson’s background, asked if he thought Senator Byrnes of South Carolina had a chance as the Democratic Party’s candidate for Vice President. Again, Robertson shared his connections to Southern Americans who were back in the business of crafting policy for America (since Reconstruction). Byrnes at the time was serving as F.D.R.’s Secretary of War Mobilization. Robertson, ever the gentleman and unofficial diplomat, noted how helpful Kennedy had been in securing flights for journalists, but he made clear in a dramatically understated way that he and Kennedy “had disagreed about the position and chances of Great Britain.” He used Kennedy as a foil to make clear to readers that he thought England would fight for their freedoms instead of throwing in the towel and appeasing Hitler for economic reasons.

In the next few pages Robertson recalled how he worked hard, “seeing, listening, going about London.” As he listened it became obvious that the British were Calvinists, that “they talked of France in terms of sin.” At a luncheon in the home of Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State to India, he was asked what American Baptists thought of the French who seemed “positively proud” when they broke the seventh commandment. Many British found the French weak—their character, some hinted,

---

was their undoing. Here, Robertson began to develop a theory. Some of the British were like many American Protestants. They shared a similar intellectual and spiritual heritage. They had the discipline, at times, of strict Puritans but also the freedom-loving spirit that provoked a few of them to seek the Promised Land within their own country and in the New World. Steadily, Robertson pondered the soul of England.

After a few days in London, Robertson headed south. As an official U.S. war correspondent and writer for *PM* with influential backers, he had connections that enabled him to stay at Cliveden with Lord and Lady Astor as the bombs burst in Plymouth, the coastal naval city. While in Plymouth, he took a stroll through history:

I went down the steep hill to the old, narrow wharf to the *Mayflower’s* dock. I went by myself because I wanted to think. I wanted to think about myself and the Pilgrims and America today and Great Britain. I wanted to probe especially into the last twenty years—to find what was wrong with peace as a nation’s thesis. In peace you live for yourself alone, in war you stand for your country. In England I had found, time and again, that I was closer to America than I had ever been before. I found myself thinking of the Puritans and the Pilgrims, of Daniel Boone [whose kin were Exeter Quakers and Robertson’s distant kin as well] and the pioneers of the West. You do not stand alone in war, you become a figure in time—you live in the river. Sacrifice becomes a real word, not a platitude, and you see history as progress that has been fought for. War is not so bad as the fear of war. The fear of war does worse things to a country than fighting. Peace must

---

be fought for. That is the only kind of peace worth having.\textsuperscript{122}

As a reporter who had studied history, he stated yet again that he saw history as a progression of struggles that could perhaps lead to peace—and indirectly to greater freedoms for all. He seemed to suggest that a freedom quest was related to finding a “peace worth having.”

When Robertson settled into Cliveden, he began to note Lady Astor’s contradictions. Like many critics at the time and still today, he remained perplexed about Lady and Lord Astor. What had they been up to within their Cliveden Set, the group of intellectuals and capitalists who wanted to appease Hitler? How did this Virginian end up as a Member of Parliament (MP) from Plymouth? How did she become such an outspoken MP—one who had no qualms about blistering Churchill when he was still among her MP peers? Robertson continued to probe Lady Astor and then offered insights about what made her tick:

She continues to be a Virginian, and she comes almost to being an emancipated American. By that I mean she does not care what the British say about us—so many Americans do. She has her own ideas about the United States; to her America is America, and it does not matter to her what other people think it is. One day I found a cheap print of Grant Wood’s \textit{American Gothic} stuck in a mirror at Cliveden —Grant Wood’s portrait of the grim, gaunt Middle Western farmer with the pitchfork, and the farmer’s grim, gaunt wife. “Why have you put that

\textsuperscript{122} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 36.
there?” I asked Lady Astor, and she said: “I think the woman is me.”

Lady Astor had a steel will and a stern, puritanical work ethic. She also had strict moral scruples when it came to drinking or bad manners. Yet, she was “emancipated” or liberated in terms of being an American. She was not like the Americans who were striving so hard to be British: the ones he alluded to in his conversation with aspiring Clemson writers. She still had her Virginia sensibilities that were very American—as American as those values suggested in Wood’s *Gothic*.

Still, Robertson questioned this royal dame as did Nancy Tree, her own flesh and blood. Nancy, the younger Virginian, married to Englishman Ronald Tree (who had family connections to the Marshall Field family), resembled her aunt as she, too, was an American who had entered British society. As Robertson told it, one day the testy Lady Astor tried to taunt her niece by asking her when she was going to enter politics. He published Nancy Tree’s retort: “I am interested in politics—I’ve been interested in politics for eighteen months, and during that time I have never seen a windjammer veer in the wind as you have.” Lady Astor only laughed, but Robertson had pegged her. He concluded his initial character sketch with a forgiving statement: “Lady Astor is one of the meanest, nice people I know. I have forgiven her for once thinking the thing to do was to appease Hitler.” The following day, the bombs burst. He then offered how

---


Lady Astor interacted with the common people of Plymouth, seeming to genuinely care, reminding the readers that her four boys were in the line of fire as well. She visited local hospitals as the Plymouth mayor’s wife and gave her ear to a Scottish soldier who had helped hold the Germans at Dunkirk. She nursed a Polish soldier and listened to the story of a young French boy since no one else could understand him. He tried to portray her as an American abroad with a civic conscience and a Puritan, almost Calvinist bent. He de-emphasized that she was one of the richest women in the world. He did his best to portray a woman transformed and finally on board with Churchill and England’s fight for spiritual freedoms. If she could change her mind, then other readers could too.

In August of 1940, the Germans bombed Dover. Robertson was there on Shakespeare’s Cliff with the press of the free world:

No journalist could stay away from Dover after he had sat all day on Shakespeare Cliff and watched those battles. Nowhere in England could the fighting be observed with such detachment and perspective. We could see the raids start, see them fought and ended, and we could get some idea of their general aspect, of how their tactics changed from day to day. The cliff was almost a stage setting, so perfect was it as an observation point, and as a result the press of the whole democratic world gathered on it.

These were wonderful days in every way—they changed me as an individual. I lost my sense of personal fear because I saw that what happened to me did not matter. We counted as individuals only as we took our place in the procession of history. It was not we who counted, it was what we stood for. And I knew now for I was standing—I was for freedom.
It was as simple as that. I realized the good that often can come from death. We were where we were and we had what we had because a whole line of our people had been willing to die. I understood Valley Forge and Gettysburg at Dover, and I found it lifted a tremendous weight off your spirit to find yourself willing to give up your life if you have to—I discovered Saint Matthew’s meaning about losing a life to find it. I don’t see now why I ever again should be afraid.  

In this passage, Robertson again resorted to his understanding of history, and it was American history that he was recounting here upon Shakespeare’s Cliff. He cherished America’s understanding of universal freedoms. Fighting tyranny was tough.

When Robertson returned to London, he continued to explore whether the struggle was indeed a freedom fight and not just a last gasp to preserve imperial empires. He commented on Secretary of Labour Ernest Bevin who was busy outlining hopes for better schools and labor relations and wages. Bevin talked of John Wesley and John Knox and reminded laboring listeners near and far that a great body of working people had fought for freedom and justice, that laborers of the past “held out for the oppressed.” Yet Robertson noted that, except for his speeches, Bevin had chosen to lay low—“learning like Lincoln to labour and to wait.” Here, the historian on the streets again emphasized the suggestion of the spiritual dimensions of this freedom fight. Even Bevin noted the connections between the slow emancipatory efforts of the

---

working class and the leadership initiatives of Protestant reformers like Wesley and Knox of the Methodist and Presbyterian traditions. Robertson suggested that Bevin was going to encourage the working class to fight yet again for a noble cause in hopes that their eventual emancipation would come about as a result of their sacrifices. They were fighting for a better internal order.

As the English prepared for the German assault, they looked to Prime Minister Winston Churchill above all others. Ever vigilant, Robertson tried to be in the House of Commons whenever Churchill spoke even though he had unprecedented access to him. As if a church moderator, Robertson explained to his American audience, Churchill “would rise and command the scene.”\textsuperscript{129} He would deliver speeches perfectly timed as “sermons are in American Negro churches.”\textsuperscript{130} The earnest witness called him the man of the hour:

It was Churchill though who at that time dominated London. He was making his wonderful speeches—the great speeches that were being quoted round the world. The American journalists in London crowded into the gallery at the House of Commons whenever Churchill spoke. . . .The Prime Minister, stooped and red of face, always very flushed, would arrange a sheaf of papers on a stand before him and begin his speeches in such a small, still voice that automatically his very tone would command attention. As he proceeded, he would take off and put on a pair

\textsuperscript{129} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 63.

\textsuperscript{130} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 63.
of horn-rimmed glasses, he would finger a ring on one of his little fingers, then he would raise his voice and cut loose with a series of roaring sentences that would bring cheers from everyone present. Churchill on those occasions was like someone out of Dickens—an old-fashioned man in an old-fashioned costume. Always he was dramatic, he played on the dramatic; his speeches were as perfectly timed as sermons are in American Negro churches. They were marvels of feeling and beauty. Churchill on all those occasions was perfect, and there was not the slightest doubt about him—he was England’s man, he was equal to the hour.

One of Robertson’s greatest strengths as a journalist was his ability to craft pithy character sketches of people who were thinking about and acting on their understanding of human liberties. It was Robertson’s most passionate theme. Here, he addressed the nobility of his readership as his invited them to compare Churchill’s speeches to the best sermons within America’s Negro churches. At this point in his narrative, he believed his American readers would honor such a comparison and he certainly did. Again, he suggested that Churchill could rise to the spiritual stature of a wise “Negro” spiritual leader. He believed in spiritual equality that demanded social and political equality. He wanted to convey that Churchill was deeply sincere and had known troubles but that he was willing to move forward with spiritual conviction. He had to make the case that this was a spiritual battle of the most profound import. Churchill was

ultimately a pilgrim, not a power hungry imperialist, but this would be a hard stance to support. Robertson was going against the grain with his belief in Churchill’s spiritual values.

During his stay in war-torn England, Robertson discovered another side of it that had received little press across the Atlantic. The high and the mighty had the capacity to prove penitent. They could admit their wrongs. At St. Paul’s he found upon the empty pews, copies of a service that he included in full within *I Saw England*. There were pages of text in which the spiritual leaders of the country prayed for support. The English spiritual leaders were asking their Lord and the world for forgiveness and for the moral strength to do better. Robertson commented on what he witnessed:

The battle was just before us now, and during the next few days everyone could sense it. The city had done all that it could do with what it could get together—it was ready now and waiting. There were great qualities during those days in London —there was faith and there was courage and there was a noble humility I had never known before in any British city. It was as though the people felt themselves in the sight of God. The English would not put such a feeling like that into words, the English do not express themselves so emotionally; but just the same there was an atmosphere about us of a church. London had made peace with its inner self; it was composed, everything spiritually at rest.

Once during those last quiet days I went into St. Paul’s Cathedral and there I found, distributed on the pews, a pamphlet which put into words the feeling we could sense about us in London. The clergy of the cathedral had drawn up a
summary of what a year of war had meant to the people of England; it was called A Review and a Re-dedication.

“Thanksgiving”—so it started. “There have been times during the past few months when it has seemed hard to find much for which we could give thanks. That is all the more reason for seeing that we do not let this element in our prayer fall into the background; to do so will certainly mean a loss of proportion, and a weakening of faith. Let us therefore set ourselves to discover those events in which we can clearly discern the hand of God working for good, whether in blessing or in discipline.” 132

The clergy of St. Paul’s then listed England’s blessings. They are offered here because they reveal just how fully connected the country was to their Protestant spiritual heritage as they prepared for the greatest freedom fight the world had ever known:

The heroism, endurance and sacrifice of those who have fought in Norway, France and Flanders. The ceaseless vigilance of the Navy and the Merchant service. The triumphant skill and daring of the Air Force. The unity in faith and purpose, which binds together those who are fighting in the cause of freedom. The devotion of those who have given their lives in the service of their country. The patient steadfastness of those who have been in training for the protection of the common life: The results of that training in effective service in time of need and danger.

The spirit of determination without arrogance in our government; the

---

demand for service and sacrifice from the nation as a whole. “The strengthening of the sense of national solidarity: the co-operation of all parties and classes; the growing realization of community and mutual helpfulness under the strain of suffering.

The clearer recognition of the moral issues involved in this struggle; and of the price, which will have to be paid for a new order, both in international relations and in the structure of society at home.

The deepening realization of the hand of God upon man both in judgment and in succor; the re-awakening of man’s sense of his need for God, and the response of God in the gift of new faith, energy and devotion.

We bless Thee, Heavenly Father, that naught can separate us from the love of Christ, neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come; that in tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword, in all of these things—we are more than conquerors.\(^{133}\)

The next section was called “Penitence”:

Some people are inclined to deprecate penitence as tending to weaken our conviction of the justice of our cause and our resolve to achieve victory. The answer to that is clear. Only cowardice, hypocrisy or a bad conscience makes men afraid to know the truth about themselves. If we are to ask for God’s help we must do so on His terms. Let us therefore acknowledge with sincerity the truths about

our national sins and weaknesses, which the war has laid bare.

We had sought for peace, but did not know or would not face the price which must be paid for having it. We tried to keep peace rather than to make it.

We had prided ourselves on our empire, but had begun to lose our strength and honour because we had put power and wealth before responsibility and duty.

We had set ourselves to achieve recovery, prosperity and security, but they were to be for ourselves, our nation, rather than for mankind.

We had perverted the true order of human life, by making wealth and profit, rather than the satisfaction of human need, the aim of our industry and commerce.

We had been blind to the continuance of needless suffering and waste in human life.

We had forgotten God and believed that we could build a better world by our own skill and effort.

We Christians had become as salt that has lost its savour.

O Thou, whose commandment is life eternal, we have sinned by class injustice, by indifferences to the sufferings of the poor, by sloth and pride and self- seeking. Turn Thou our hearts that we may truly repent, and lead us into the way of truth and justice.\textsuperscript{134}

The next section was called “Intercession” in which the spiritual leaders remembered the needs of the world—the refugees and those who had broken under the

\textsuperscript{134} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 116.
strain of fear and treachery, the oppressors and all who were led astray by evil, the peoples of China and Japan, the peoples of India and their demand for freedom to exercise responsibility for themselves.\textsuperscript{135}

Finally, there came “Dedication” that included requests for spiritual support such as this: “Let us pray that God will use us, if it is His will, as the means through which the domination of force and falsehood is broken, and mankind set free to build a new way of life.”\textsuperscript{136}

In ecclesiastical terms, the clergy of St. Paul’s and the Anglican Church had stated the war hopes of London. No wonder the author, editor and publisher had allowed such a lengthy insertion from a printed pamphlet. Robertson surely saw it as one of the best representative artifacts or primary sources for revealing the spiritual depths of many of the English people. The petition could also be understood by most church-going Americans who would be reading it since the English had similar religious traditions and forms of public confession. Impressively, the clergy sought forgiveness for particulars such as trying to appease the Germans and for abusing the people of India. This took courage and humility to share such weaknesses publically, knowing full well that some would think it unwise to note such weaknesses when they needed to do all they could to remain strong. They sought forgiveness.

These few selected passages within \textit{I Saw England} and many others have revealed how Robertson sought to help American readers reflect upon their deepest identity as he

\textsuperscript{135} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 116-117.

\textsuperscript{136} Robertson, \textit{I Saw England}, 117.
covered the Blitz and as he pointed them back to their earliest American roots as exiles with an errand, an errand to seek or create a spiritual community that would be welcoming and strengthening and a template for freedom seekers the world over. He had become convinced of his calling to remain true to the errand, no matter what the cost.

As Robertson suggested in the opening of *I Saw England*, he saw London, especially, as a cold-hearted city. He had visited several times and had covered the Naval Conference over several months in the mid-thirties. He also wrote a private journal reflection in which he sorted out his qualms with the British. He tried to trace the origins on his prejudices. In a detailed eight-page typed reflection months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he tried to think about his relationship with the British—especially as he was beginning to see firsthand some of the repercussions of their imperial excesses throughout Asia and Africa. Despite the length of his opening comments about his childhood aversions and delights toward all things British, they are worth sharing as they help make clearer that Robertson was not a staunch Anglophile upon accepting his position as a London correspondent. As shared he had true doubts that were transformed into high regard in Britain’s finest hour:

**An American and Britain**

I loved and hated England when I was a child, a generation ago in South Carolina. I loved that far off island because the Pilgrim Fathers had come from there, and I loved the British people because I was kin to them and because for a thousand years they had fought all over the world with courage and because they
believed in themselves, and had rebelled against kings, and had died to make
themselves free. I loved the quality the British had that was beyond victory and
that no terror could ever touch—the spirit that had moved the band on the Titanic
to go down playing a hymn, and that had caused Kipling to celebrate Queen
goodness and for the quality of her heart.

I hated England’s kings. I especially hated King George III. Still, I loved
Queen Elizabeth and I loved King Alfred and King Arthur and Richard the Lion-
hearted and King Lear. I said to myself I would not bow my knee to any earthly
monarch but at the same time I liked to read books about Englishmen who did
crook their knees and were created knights. One of the most stirring stories I ever
read as a child was a book by Marie Corelli called Thelma, and I like it because an
Englishman with a title fell in love in a cave with a Norwegian farm girl, married
her, and brought her to London to be introduced at a great ball as “Lady Bruce-
Errington.” I was scornful of all the lords and ladies at that ball, but I know now
that nothing would have pleased me more than to have had the butler call out my
name at the door. I would have been delighted to have been admitted into the
presence of the dukes and duchesses of Great Britain, and I would have behaved
like Benjamin Franklin at the French court in Paris. I would have walked in with
my hat in my hand and have said, “Howdy do,” to the king. What I wanted was to
be received as an equal by the lords and ladies and then publicly to insult them. I
hated dukes and duchesses for I was an American democratic snob—I was a snob
in reserve. I hated the British peerage because I had an idea they looked down on
me. I hated them because I had no opportunity in South Carolina to show them how few figs did I care for their titles.\textsuperscript{137}

Robertson’s comparisons continued for pages as he explained how he came to know the British. For example, he and a friend were snubbed in a New Zealand hostel so they pulled off their dirty socks and placed them over the hearth right where the stodgy, elderly British visitors were hogging the warmth. In 1935 he was “stationed” in England. Day after day he wrote dispatches about British errors. He created a long list of hates: “I hated Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain and I formed unprintable opinions of Lord Halifax, Sir Samuel Hoare and Sir John Simon. A South Carolina Democrat, I even defended Herbert Hoover in England.”\textsuperscript{138}

He returned to England in 1936 for what he called the “naval disarmament conference.” After that experience he thanked God that an ocean was between America and Europe for he knew that war was inevitable. He returned once again in 1939, just a year before he would accept the position with \textit{PM}. During this time he would get the background he needed for his \textit{Saturday Evening Post} article, “King George Strives to Please.” He knew that America and England had let the peace slip from their grasp because of all of their selfishness and bickering so he decided he would atone for his ways. He wanted peace. He would no longer “[fan] Anglo-American ill-will.”\textsuperscript{139} His next trip would be to London at the time of Dunkirk as a war correspondent for \textit{PM}. The rest of his reflection,


then, was about how he had slowly come to appreciate the British. Lest critics suggest that Robertson was recruited for *PM* because of his Puritan connections to the motherland and his excessive Anglo-philia, they should take the time to dust off Robertson’s journal reflections within his collected papers. Robertson had plenty of reasons to question the British.

Robertson grew to respect the valor of the British, but did his message hit home in the United States? Several reviews of *I Saw England* suggest that Robertson’s spiritual, freedom-yearning focus while in England came through. Reviewing for the *Atlanta Journal*, Robertson’s childhood friend, Wright Bryan, noted the internal drama of the book: Robertson’s shift from skeptic to believer in the freedom fight. For him, the most moving passage was the one that captured Robertson’s freedom-seeking heritage from the Pilgrims down to his distant kinsman, Daniel Boone.140 A. John Cournos, reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*, highlighted that Robertson was a man thinking about history, that Robertson and Londoners saw their city as a spiritual one. They did not surrender just to save their physical treasures and infrastructures, as did neighboring France. Rather, they were willing to risk their material treasures for freedom’s sake.141 R. J. Lewis in *Speaking of Books* also highlighted Robertson’s freedom focus. He drew on Robertson’s epiphany on Shakespeare Cliff—again an indirect indicator that critical readers found it helpful that he revealed his own efforts to come to terms with who he


was as a freedom seeking pilgrim as he attempted to sustain others in their journeys.\textsuperscript{142} New Haven’s \textit{Register} also noted the evolving coming-of-age freedom-yearning tilt: “You see Mr. Robertson grow up, too. You see his faith that England can ‘take it’ rooting in what he saw from day to day, and growing like the flowers of London’s parks which blossomed in the smoke of bombs.”\textsuperscript{143} A review in Providence, Rhode Island’s \textit{Journal} went so far as to bet that the book would “transform readers” with its insistence upon the British peoples’ valiant freedom-seeking cause.”\textsuperscript{144} The \textit{Banner} of Bennington, Vermont extolled the book’s beauty, a rare reportorial gift. The implied beauty was that of expressing so richly England’s spiritual courage that stemmed, in part, from their freedom ideals.\textsuperscript{145}

Along the same lines, \textit{The Saturday Review of Literature} highlighted a soulful passage, one that Robertson crafted ever so carefully to show the spiritual freedom quest of this mighty country under siege:

He heard an organist playing Handel in Milton’s church that had not a window left in it. “London at that moment was magnificent. Everywhere there were craters and ruins, but the city in this crisis had re-discovered itself; it was living as it had never lived. . . .You came out on the street at daybreak now with the feeling that

\textsuperscript{142} Collection of Book Reviews on \textit{I Saw England}, 1941, Ben Robertson Papers.

\textsuperscript{143} Collection of Book Reviews on \textit{I Saw England}, 1941, Ben Robertson Papers.

\textsuperscript{144} Collection of Book Reviews on \textit{I Saw England}, 1941, Ben Robertson Papers.

\textsuperscript{145} Collection of Book Reviews on \textit{I Saw England}, 1941, Ben Robertson Papers.
you personally had been helping to save the world.”

Just as London had re-discovered itself, Robertson had claimed yet again something deep within himself, an idea that had been long in the making within the Western tradition, an idea given expression within the Christian tradition and by the likes of Milton and Handel. The review that best captured the nonfiction writer’s pithy sense of a spiritual freedom battle came from Boston’s Herald. It was the only review that drew attention to England’s contrite heart in light of its imperial excesses. Lest there be any doubt that the down-home upcountry reporter wrote for the common reader and not just for the Brahmins of Boston, the associate editor of the pedestrian Reader’s Digest, who had just paid handsomely for an adaptation of I Saw England, allayed that fear: it was “the most vivid and valuable book I’ve ever read on the subject, and I’ve read a good many.” Robertson wrote for everyday freedom-inspired pilgrims throughout the new world.

Robertson saw himself and Americans as being a part of a larger heritage that was all about enlarging spiritual freedoms. Even in England, three thousand miles from home, he continued to think about America’s role in human history. He let his stories of England in her finest hour serve as object lessons for Americans as they, along with their faithful reporter, thought about their evolving mission within a world-wide freedom struggle.


By all published accounts, Ben Robertson, Jr. was not only respected by American critics but by his peers as well. His work also compares quite favorably to theirs. Upon Robertson’s passing, Edward R. Murrow, who considered Robertson to be one of his best friends and a fine correspondent, shared over CBS radio that Robertson was the “least hard-boiled” within the profession. Murrow and Robertson were together during the first days of bombing in London and spent many evenings together throughout Robertson’s tenure in England. Murrow had been stationed in England for several years prior to Robertson’s arrival, but Robertson had made several strategic trips to England during that time as well as he covered naval conferences and the change of leadership with King George. Murrow focused much more specifically on broadcast journalism so it is difficult to compare their work. Certainly, Robertson had a much richer sense of living history as he was well-versed in European and American history and literature. He also had a keener sense of Protestant religious history and how that influenced the thinking of the British people. Murrow was born in the South but soon moved to Washington State. They both had American middle class roots, and both supported democratic ideals and the strengths and rights of the common people. They liked working together.

Vincent Sheean, a highbrow intellectual from the University of Chicago, was most impressed with Robertson as well. Like Robertson, he had worked for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He covered and wrote award-winning books about the Spanish Civil War and his experiences in Berlin. Only four years older than Robertson, he welcomed him and traveled with him during their coverage of the Battle of Britain. In fact, Sheean
was with Murrow and Robertson as well on Saturday, September 7th, 1940 when they watched upon a haystack Hitler’s first major assault on London. About Robertson, Sheean noted that although Robertson had only been in London for a short while, he had come to know the people and they him. Several of Robertson’s PM articles were reprinted in both The Times and The Telegraph—national British newspapers. About his adopted friend, Sheean shared supportive opinions in his Between the Thunder and the Sun published in 1943:

Ben Robertson was the correspondent for PM of New York, a militantly anti-Fascist newspaper founded earlier that year. It was too new for the British to have heard much about it, and Ben’s first weeks in London had been plagued by the necessity of explaining to everybody he met that PM was a newspaper, that its name was indeed PM, that it had no other name, and that it was actually printed, and circulated to a choice list of subscribers every day. Ben, round-faced and a youthful thirty-four or thirty-five years of age, sputtered like a college freshman when he had to deal with repeated incidents of this kind. The difficulty was solved by the London practice of reprinting dispatches that had appeared in New York; a few of Ben’s were cabled back to London and appeared in the Times and Telegraph—“Mr. Ben Robertson says in today’s PM”—and established his identity on a really firm basis. Before long he was as known in London as the oldest resident, and much better liked than most, since his amiable and gregarious nature found many friends. He had, and has, an unshakable South Carolina accent, which endeared him to Lady Astor’s heart;
she made him a familiar of her house, both at Cliveden and at Plymouth; by
September, when he had been in England a few weeks, he knew as many people
as most men who had worked in London for years in peacetime.149

Sheean had already won one of the first ever National Book Awards for his Personal
History, a 1935 non-fiction work before he worked with Robertson. He would share his
impressions of other journalists throughout his Thunder and the Sun, indirectly
suggesting that Robertson was clearly among the best in the field. Like Sheean,
Robertson had a strong grasp of European history (but he lacked his extensive language
background), yet Sheean lacked the focus on religious history and the religious values
that seemed to absorb Robertson. It must also be noted that Lady Astor’s husband and
brother-in-law owned the British papers in which Robertson’s re-issued PM articles
appeared. This may have had something to do with the way Robertson was received
within Cliveden and at Plymouth and may explain, in part, why his work was readily re-
issued.

Helen Kirkpatrick was another good friend of Ben Robertson’s while he was in
London. They corresponded in writing and honored each other’s work.150 Kirkpatrick
had covered the League of Nations and published a primer called Under the British
Umbrella: What the English Are and How They Go to War in 1939, shortly before she
began to cover the blitz. This highly detailed analysis of various British cabinet offices

149 Vincent Sheean, Between the Thunder and the Sun, (New York: Random
House), 214.

150 Letters from Helen Kirkpatrick to Ben Robertson, 1941-1943. Ben
Robertson Papers.
and how they worked and thought, especially the ones involved in foreign affairs, enabled interested Americans to appreciate the problems England would soon encounter. In the last chapter of her book she described Britain as a “creaking machine.” Kirkpatrick had done her homework and Robertson fully understood this. Like Robertson, she was considered by David Bruce for the newly formed Office of Strategic Services (OSS), America’s precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency and actually worked for them. Robertson passed away before the OSS became a fully functioning intelligence agency. Kirkpatrick’s letters to Robertson within Clemson University’s Special Collections suggest that she honored his opinions especially in regard to the Irish situation. Her writing, in contrast, was far more formulaic and encyclopedic than Robertson’s more literary approach. Still, she had a keen sense of European politics that Robertson seemed to share. She also had roots in West Virginia. She had some Southern ways about her.

Quentin Reynolds also shared a few insights about Robertson related to their efforts in England. Quentin, unlike Sheean and Kirkpatrick, was less of an intellectual but had certainly been engrossed in covering wars. He was more like a public relations genius and certainly made a big splash in London as he offered the narration for the propaganda film, Britain Can Take It. Regardless, he was quite prolific. His books that he published at about the same time that Robertson published I Saw England were relatively thin in comparison to Robertson’s work. He seemed to like to write about how he drank with the rich and famous. He would write pages, for example, about playing cards with ambassadors and cabinet officers. He was, however, able to help
readers believe that he was talking to them, just telling stories as they unfolded in his memory. Within his *Only the Stars Are Neutral*, he offered a few insights about Robertson:

Ben Robertson of *PM* sent his story [that was censored], telling of the seven-to-three ratio in losses [during the battles on the Dover coast in August]. It was, we all thought, a grand story and a fine tribute to the RAF. The censor thought otherwise. Ben could say that seven German airplanes had been shot down, but he couldn’t mention the three British losses. Robertson is a tenacious young man. He refused to accept the censor’s edict. He went to the censor’s boss, and then to that man’s boss and to his boss, and finally he got to the top—Duff Cooper. The story was eventually sent, but it took Robertson thirteen hours to have it released.

Robertson was also the victim of the oddest bit of censorship any of us has been subject to. A line of his was cut from a story because of “bad manners.” Two girls, Diana Brand (niece of Lady Astor) and Lady Mary Rose Fitzroy, were doing a magnificent job of serving tea, sandwiches and chocolate to the balloon-barrage stations in the East End of London during the heavy blitzes of last winter. Robertson went around with them one day. He noticed the friendly way the troops greeted the two women. One would call to Lady Mary Rose, “Hi, Blondy, ‘ow about a bit of a dance tonight?” Another would yell to Diana, “Hey, Sparky, got anything on for tonight?” It was the good-natured sort of joking common to troops of every nation and the two girls accepted it as such.
Robertson wrote the story, but the censor took out his big, blue pencil. He cut all of the facetious remarks out of it with the stern admonition, “Such remarks cast reflections on the manners of His Majesty’s armed forces.” Robertson was kept from tossing himself into the Thames only when we reminded him that Berlin censorship was probably even worse.\(^{151}\)

Regardless of censorship hassles, Robertson persisted in valiant ways as he tried to share the news—even if his news suggested that the British were having a very tough time or even too good of a time. Quentin Reynolds liked Robertson’s tenacity.

Ernie Pyle began to cover the Battle of Britain much later, but he and Robertson had already established a friendship as letters within Robertson’s papers suggest.\(^{152}\) In his article “The Fabulous Infantry: Italy—December 1943-April 1944,” that was included within *Ernie Pyle: Brave Men*, Pyle paid tribute to his newly deceased friend. He remembered his kind heart:

> Newcomer that I was, there were a dozen men I could name in the blackness.

> Eddie Young’s voice especially haunted me. It was soft, and there was a tolerant and gentle humor in it. It was a perfect duplicate of the voice of my friend Ben Robertson, the correspondent who was killed in the clipper crash at Lisbon the


\(^{152}\) Letters from Ernie Pyle and his wife to Ben Robertson, 1939-1942. Ben Robertson Papers.
year before. Whenever Eddie spoke, I could not help feeling that Ben was marching behind me. Pyle, rarely tender, had a tender spot for Robertson. Pyle was well-known for his life among everyday soldiers. He, too, would lose his life before the end of the war. His picture also hangs within the Pentagon along with Robertson’s and other war correspondents who lost their lives in this world-wide freedom struggle. Robertson had good friends among the press and was well received. Just from these brief excerpts, Robertson comes across as a fierce supporter of the free press, a good friend, a fine journalist, and a warm spirited being. He also endeared himself to the British people. He was a top-notch international war correspondent.

While covering the Battle of Britain, Robertson seemed to have lost his fear as he suggested upon Shakespeare’s Cliff. His writings, his interview with Ingersoll, the reviews of his work, as well as his efforts among his peers all suggest that Robertson knew his mission. He was writing to preserve and encourage precious freedoms, freedoms that he desired for himself, his people, and people throughout the world, freedoms that Americans, attuned to its original errand, supported.

---

EPILOGUE

How, then, did Ben Robertson, Jr., an upcountry South Carolinian, make his way to Shakespeare’s Cliff to cover what Whitelaw Reid, Jr., a scion of the New York Herald Tribune’s leading family, considered “the biggest story since the birth of Jesus Christ?” What within Robertson’s life story enabled him to declare at this pivotal moment in history that he was willing to lose his life for freedom’s sake? How did he evolve into a champion of American freedoms within his own country and beyond? What did he do to earn such an accolade?

The purpose of this study was to begin to explore how Robertson could have evolved into such a progressive, international champion of American freedoms. My review of his life efforts have reminded me of just how difficult it was for most citizens within the upcountry of South Carolina at the turn of the century. Many well-meaning people of diverse persuasions faced major political, economic, social and personal barriers as they struggled to rebuild their state and realize their personal dreams. Though blessed in many ways, Ben Robertson, Jr. also had to work in creative ways to break through barriers that obstructed so many.

Slowly, I began to realize that Ben Robertson, Jr. had many upcountry people who were championing his development as a defender of America’s freedoms. Before Robertson was even born, Thomas Green Clemson worked tirelessly to establish a more egalitarian, scientifically-oriented college that would give the state’s white, male youth a chance to realize their dreams as they worked to become civic leaders of a much
larger constituency within their state and beyond. Robertson’s father was one of the first graduates of this scientific seminary who would go on to serve his alma mater and the state for the rest of his life. Ben Robertson, Jr. would come of age in this Clemson College community, becoming in a way the scion of a dream that began decades before his birth.

Within this small college community he was forever supported by his father, to whom he would dedicate his *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, letting his readers know that his father was “the salt of the Southern earth,” an epithet that worked in a literal way in the sense that he was involved in the fertilizer business but also in a spiritual way as it alluded to the Sermon on the Mount, suggesting that his father was about renewing the spirit of his beloved South. Several unlikely upcountry eccentrics caught Robertson’s fancy and inspired his liberating literary efforts as well. He offered one of the longest and most rounded character sketches of an African American to come out of the South by a white writer within his day. Windy Bill, his African American childhood mentor, helped him develop ways to make the best out of circumscribed circumstances through trickster techniques. Robertson also learned to respect the wisdom of women as he learned to read words and the world with his great Aunt Narcissa. Within his college town, he had the help of a music teacher, Mrs. Dargan, who gave him the support he needed to forge a college jazz troupe, entertain Missouri upper classmen, and offer succor to Churchill and his friends as he played for them a few southern spirituals in the midst of world war. While a student at Clemson College, Robertson developed a strong bond with President Riggs who offered an image of a
Southern civic leader with an international service perspective. Professor D.W. Daniel, who gave a eulogy upon Robertson’s passing, helped him develop persuasive rhetorical skills, tools he would use throughout his life as he vied for freedoms near and far.

Beyond his upcountry community Robertson would find mentors within American literary and political history and throughout his journey. As a child, young Robertson read about Americans who believed in fighting for and ensuring American freedoms. According to his own recollections, he valued the beliefs of freedom loving leaders such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and his own kinsman, Daniel Boone. At Missouri he grew to respect Dean Walter Williams who had forged a world congress of journalists who would spread his spirit for international comradeship and abide by his high professional standards. While he worked in D.C. Robertson wrote about President Roosevelt’s New Deal leaders who worked day in out to enlarge the freedoms of underrepresented citizens such as laborers, farmers and women. He found inspiration from the life work of George Washington Carver. In England, he began to support the efforts of Churchill and Bevin as he studied their true emancipatory aims. He dedicated *I Saw England* to Ralph Ingersoll, a mentor who opened doors for the aspiring journalist and who believed in fighting against big league bullies who liked to push little people around. When Robertson talked with cadets at Clemson, he invited them to consider the liberating efforts of his literary mentors. He encouraged them to consider the thoughts of Hawthorne, Emerson and Thoreau. He suggested that they explore the efforts of female writers such as Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett. In his Foreword to *Travelers’ Rest*, he revealed that Walt Whitman’s writings had inspired him to trace this
own family’s freedom quest. Upon Shakespeare’s Cliff, he would allude to the life and words of Jesus as he revealed his freedom stance.

In reflecting upon Robertson’s pilgrimage to Shakespeare’s Cliff, it seems he had an uncanny ability to develop relationships, imaginary and real, with other pilgrims who were committed to freedom agendas that were far larger than self-seeking gratification. He used insights from their life stories and creations to forge his own freedom quest. He would use their insights as instruction for his daily dealings.

Far more study is needed to appreciate how Ben Robertson tapped into what Perry Miller and Edmund Morgan have called America’s ongoing errand into the wilderness or America’s ongoing search for a liberating and strengthening way of living and being. The outline of his life story certainly suggests that he was in touch with this American civic and spiritual tradition, but much more questioning and research is needed to understand how he connected to it so passionately. How, for example, did his family’s religious roots affect their civic values and Robertson’s own? How did his family come to be Baptists with strong Patriot leanings as the American Revolution unfolded within South Carolina? How did those same convictions help or hinder them as they slowly bought into Carolina’s slave-holding, cotton producing economy? What within Robertson’s larger ancestral history, a question he himself was passionate about, contribute to the freedom-yearning man he was to become? Far more study is also needed to reveal in what specific ways Robertson helped others in their struggles to be free. Questions such as these still abound and far more sources must be unearthed and considered.
Regardless, this study has offered a challenge to current scholarship about Ben Robertson’s life and legacy. His life and legacy are far more significant than the authorship of the southern classic *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*. He offered his earnest readers, then and now, far more than “reverie.” His legacy is not limited to his contributions within the southern modernist literary tradition either. Rather, this study provides evidence that his greatest legacy may be as an exemplar of an American public servant. Ben Robertson, Jr. of the upcountry of South Carolina championed American freedoms as he continually crafted published narratives for readers who truly wanted to learn about how real, everyday people throughout the world were struggling together to craft strengthening communities, ones that would extend freedoms for many and not just the privileged few. Robertson’s larger legacy is as a champion of American freedoms within his state, country and beyond.


Burton, Orville Vernon. “Race and Reconstruction in Edgefield County, South
Carolina.” *Journal of Social History* 12 (Fall 1978); 31-56.


Bryan, Wright Papers. Clemson University Special Collections. Clemson, South Carolina.


*Finest Hour: The Battle of Britain*. Produced and directed by Tim Clayton and Phil Craig. 150 min. Public Broadcasting System, 2000. DVD.


___, *Action on All Fronts: A Personal Account of this War by the Only Man Who Has Seen Every Sector of It*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941, 1942.


Robertson, Jr. Ben F. Papers. Clemson University Special Collections.


___.“The Mattress-Stuffing Tree,” *Asia* August (1931): 492


___.“King George Strives to Please,” *Saturday Evening Post* 4 Feb (1939): 5-7.


Robertson, Ben with McCoy Hill. “At the Heart of Desolation,” Travel February (1929): 38.


TAPS Yearbooks. vols xiii-xvi. Clemson University Special Collections. Clemson University.


Williams, B.O. Papers. Clemson University Special Collections. Clemson, South Carolina.


APPENDIX

Ingersoll Interview with Ben Robertson in *PM*

December 1940

(In his radio speech, Kennedy opposed the British aid bill and, denying he was an appeaser, reoffered the appeasers’ arguments.)

Explaining the Paradox of Joe Kennedy...
PM’s London Correspondent and PM’s Editor Sort Out Their Facts on Retiring Ambassador Before He Makes Radio Appearance
By Ralph Ingersoll

The Interview

Ingersoll: Ex-Ambassador Kennedy, you know, is talking on the radio tonight. Did you have any chance to know him when you were in London? Did you have any business with him? Did you and the other American correspondents there interest yourselves at all in how this country was being represented in London?

Robertson: Yes, we did. We had constant business with him. We saw him on many occasions. In fact, to the American correspondents, how well we were represented was one of the most important questions we felt we had to answer. You know, London, in the midst of the war is a small town and everybody knows everybody else, especially among the American colony. We were in particularly close contact with the Ambassador because we were all aliens in a country that was at war and every step we took had to be taken through the Ambassador. We were in and out of his office every day on some business or other. All of us.

Ingersoll: As I recall, you also got to know the men who were fighting the Nazis pretty well too—the active members of the British Government, men who were shooting down Messerschmitts, hunting raiders and submarines. Do you think they could have concealed their real opinions from you?

Robertson: No, certainly not. If you go through a crisis with people there is sure to come a time when you stop talking for the record and making diplomatic speeches and say what you really think.

Ingersoll: Possibly you even asked such an indiscreet question as “What do you think of the American Ambassador in London?” sometime or other?
Robertson: Yes, that is true. They told us what Kennedy had said to them. In fact, one of the interesting things was to compare what Kennedy had said to them with what he had said to us. He always led them to believe he was their greatest friend and even that last news reel he made—before he left the embassy to get the plane to Lisbon—gave the implication that they were doing a fine job and that he was on their side. I was at the embassy when that news reel was being made. It cheered up the British a great deal. They thought it was fine.

Ingersoll: I don’t quite get that. You tell me that the British were pleased by what he said to them, but it doesn’t sound as if you American correspondents always were. Didn’t he say the same thing to you that he said to them?

Robertson: No. I was relieved when I heard about the news reel because that hadn’t been my impression at all. He had given me and other American correspondents the distinct impression that he was very skeptical about Britain’s chances.

Ingersoll: The American Ambassador said one thing to the British and another to the American correspondents?

Robertson: Yes. In fact, I was relieved when I heard what he said for the news reel because I was afraid he had lost confidence.

Ingersoll: Lost confidence? That is interesting. What kind of people did he talk to or do business with?

He Saw Everybody

Robertson: Well, he saw everybody. But one whom he admired and often talked about was Chamberlain. He often said he was a misunderstood man and often mentioned that he was proud about the fact that he was the one who had introduced Lindbergh to Chamberlain.

It is so difficult to get that man Kennedy down. He was so devious. You remember how we talked about his logic—how we couldn’t see that his conclusions could possibly come from his premises.

He still seems to think that Britain wasn’t prepared to fight. Perhaps shouldn’t have fought. But on the other hand he would give you the impression that they were right in fighting. Our hooray for them. Sometimes he thought we should help them. Sometimes he thought we shouldn’t. Sometimes he said they were giving us a chance to arm. That we should arm—but that they would eventually lose and that was that. That we should drop them overboard and that they didn’t
count. Still he told the people in the newsreel that they were doing a fine job.

Ingersoll: Well, I have one clear picture of Kennedy in London at least. Mr. Kennedy was a man who said one thing at one time, and a different thing at another; one thing to one person and one thing to another. And believed in Chamberlain and Lindbergh? Is that an accurate statement?

Robertson: Yes.

Ingersoll: Well, how can you account for such an inconsistency? Did anyone in London have any theories?

Robertson: We talked about it constantly every day. He was a great puzzle to us and finally the only way we could explain it was that he was a Wall Street bear. He was a confirmed pessimist and would sell anything short.

**Bombing and Business**

Ingersoll: You mean that whereas military men and working journalists and people whose lives are involved in a war can get used to bombing it may be harder for a big business man who is jumpy about his profits?

Robertson: He told us one day, “This war’s raising hell with my business.”

Ingersoll: Yes, I can see how it would. But I was also thinking of the difference between the way people take bombing. I don’t know about Kennedy personally but I did notice that there were some people in London whose judgment was less affected by fear than others.

Robertson: We used to laugh about the fact that Kennedy stayed in the country most of the time instead of in London. The story that we heard all over London was that Kennedy, having taken the stand he did – publicly approving the British – he thought he had to stay long enough to be bombed. After he had been there three months he felt that was enough. He didn’t like it. But he felt he was obligated to go through a few bombs and raids to save face.

Ingersoll: No one likes being bombed. Why didn’t the British Government leave London? They were as free to go to the country as Joe Kennedy.

Robertson: The Government believed in what they were fighting for and they stayed at their posts. He came home as quickly as he could.

Ingersoll: That’s just your own opinion?
Robertson: No. That was the opinion of most of the correspondents. They come in all colors and shapes and sizes but correspondents aren’t taken in very long. One funny thing about Kennedy was that he never seemed to think anybody would remember his off-the-record speeches. We never printed them, of course. But we were all highly interested in London when we read about one of them in the Boston Globe. He told us the general sense, exactly what was in the interview he disowned. He once told me that he saw nothing in store for the world but anarchy.

Ingersoll: It hardly reflects the quality of fighting for one’s principles that is so characteristic of Mr. Roosevelt and the Administration Mr. Kennedy was representing in London.

Robertson: No. But, we never had such an idea that he was a friend of the President’s.

Ingersoll: What made you say that?

Robertson: Well, the day he left he gave a party. He took his coat off and said, “Boys, I’m going to say what I haven’t been able to for two years. I have been saying yes when I meant no.” Our impression was that he was going home to denounce the President and might back the Republicans. I was so concerned I got word to him to think it over before he acted. No man appointed by the Democratic Party can come out against the nominee for the Democratic Party. Some of his secretaries told me they had been arguing with him for days. And it certainly was our impression in London that he was dead against Roosevelt. One correspondent even wrote up the story. The rest of us didn’t get out on a limb because we knew him. We knew how mercurial he was. We have been wondering ever since what happened between the time he left London and the time he arrived in New York. When he came out for the President just before the election he was doing the same kind of thing he had been doing in London—saying one thing for the public and another in private.

They Liked Him

Ingersoll: You know, talking to you about Kennedy in London is like developing a negative in the dark room. There’s a picture emerging here but it doesn’t seem to me to be the picture of one of America’s great men. He doesn’t look like Benjamin Franklin, the man who represented our interests in France in the course of the American Revolution.

Robertson: He was a Ben Franklin though in one way. He was a breath of fresh
air to the English with all his Irishness and his nine children. And they had never had a liquor dealer before as the ambassador of a foreign power.

Ingersoll: Well, the Germans used to send the English their Von Ribbentrop, who used to sell champagne. I remember you telling me Kennedy was an efficient fellow in the way he ran his embassy.

Robertson: He couldn’t have been better. And personally I hate to say anything against him because he was so helpful in that respect. Times were serious in London and often we needed his help in our personal problems. We could always depend upon him. He was always available, would listen to us and do something about it immediately. He was almost like a father in his personal concern about our safety. One day some of us were going to Dover. He phoned us. What hotel were we going to stay at? How long were we going to be there? He got us on planes into and out of England and we were all grateful to him.

Ingersoll: It may be an unkind thing to say, but from what you have told me I would believe that Joe Kennedy was a very sensitive man on the subject of safety.

Robertson: Yes. He frequently urged all of us to go home.

Ingersoll: Did he ever say anything to you about what he thought Britain’s war aims were?

Robertson: He said, “I can’t make head or tail out of what this war’s all about. If you can find out why the British are standing up against the Nazis you are a better man than I am.”

Ingersoll: That is rather an extraordinary statement for any ambassador—particularly one representing a President who has been so outspoken in his analysis of the forces involved in the war in Europe.

Was He Moved?

Robertson: I don’t think Kennedy is concerned with those forces. Do you?

Ingersoll: A man with a sense of morality would be. In London you and I both saw innocent people killed. We saw people fighting for the right to work out their own destiny. We saw people willing to suffer all kinds of hardship, risking death and destruction not only for themselves but for the people they loved. Don’t you think that these things moved Kennedy?
Robertson: Yes, indeed. I think they did move him. But, still it was bad for business.

Ingersoll: I am gradually getting what you mean. You left London only a little while ago. Did the British people you talked with still feel Kennedy was their friend?

Robertson: They certainly did not. They were disillusioned and what disillusioned them were the statements he made here. Like a man who poses as your friend talking behind your back. They heard he was going around here to dinners in Hollywood and other places talking off the record with appeasement-minded people. That was the kind of talk they were helpless to combat.

Ingersoll: That doesn’t sound as if the appeasement block in England was very strong. The appeasement block must have approved of Kennedy.

Robertson: There is no appeasement block in England. If there is, it certainly isn’t saying anything now. It has no power at all.

Ingersoll: The American Embassy is not entirely a one man show. There are many trained observers attached to an embassy in a great capital. Did the trained observers in the American legation all see the situation the way he saw it?

Robertson: Not any of them that I talked with.

_A Hopeless Case?_

Ingersoll: They didn’t think the British case was hopeless?

Robertson: Not all.

Ingersoll: Kennedy made up his mind by himself then? Without taking their knowledge or advice?

Robertson: He may have even made his mind up before the event.

Ingersoll: What makes you say that?

Robertson: He had taken that line long ago and felt he had to continue it.

Ingersoll: Then you go back to his belief in Chamberlain and Lindbergh and _their_ ideas?
Robertson: It was felt that the difference in opinion between Kennedy and the military and naval aids was the reason Washington sent Donovan (Col. William J. Donovan of the Fighting 69th) over—in order to see who was right. We know Kennedy was furious about Donovan’s arrival. While he was there, there was a rumor that Kennedy had resigned three times. We certainly know what Donovan’s conclusions were. They weren’t Kennedy’s at all.

Ingersoll: Donovan thought it was a good cause, well fought. Then you think Donovan’s confidence may have come from talking with other American observers?

Robertson: The British turned over everything to him. He saw everybody as you did and I think his conclusions were based on that, too.

Ingersoll: Did Kennedy spend much time with the British military people at Dover and at the military air ports?

Robertson: I never saw him at Dover at all and I never saw his picture taken in any of the army camps.

Ingersoll: Did he spend much time visiting shelters with correspondents?

Robertson: Not with us.

Ingersoll: Did he ever go to the fire department during a raid and see how the fires were going on when there were bombers about?

Robertson: He was in the country.

Ingersoll: Well, that interests me professionally of course. As an observer I don’t see how a man can appraise the progress of a war without visiting it and assuring himself on the equipment and morale of the fighting forces. Did the American military observers in the embassy get out and around?

Robertson: All the time. The naval observers were with the ships at sea.

Ingersoll: And those are the people whose opinion Kennedy passed up?

Robertson: Look. You know what Gen. Strong said when he came back. He believed the British could hold out.

Ingersoll: I think that is terribly important to the American people to understand these things because we are 3000 miles away and we have to take the opinion of
expert witnesses.

Robertson: Since the Washington left July 7 there haven’t been 50 Americans who have come out of England.

**Quite a Person**

Ingersoll: So you wouldn’t say I was talking through my hat if I said these things: that the observers who got around the most, saw the most and heard the most were the correspondents and the military observers attached to the legation. And the question of how the war’s going, if it comes to an issue with Mr. Kennedy, is their word against his?

Robertson: Their word and facts.

Ingersoll: You know, I doubt if people really understand that. The title of ambassador is a pretty over-powering one for most folks. It sounds so reliable and disinterested.

Robertson: You know Kennedy always wanted people to use his full title—His Excellency, the United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James.

Ingersoll: He looks well in a high hat. It is too bad American ambassadors don’t get to wear knee breeches any more.

Robertson: Even the English don’t dress for dinner now. They are busy fighting a war. Look here. Can a fellow who is being interviewed ask a question? Do you know why President Roosevelt sent Mr. Kennedy to England in the first place?

Ingersoll: Not first hand. But after the little I had heard in London and after the Louis Lyons interview in the Boston Globe I made some enquiries. It appears that the same kind of thing you observed in London had been going on in Washington. That is—Kennedy’s getting so involved emotionally that some of the things he was saying privately sounded irresponsible. Someone suggested to the President that the simplest way out of the embarrassment would be to change Mr. Kennedy’s address. Which wasn’t hard to arrange because many people who are impressed by title and position have worked their whole lives to get an appointment to a foreign court, and Kennedy was that kind of a man. At the same time no one in Washington really foresaw how important to the future of civilization such a job would become. The most experienced people in Washington write Kennedy’s appointment off to political expediency. But I don’t know that with my own knowledge. That is simply what responsible and serious-minded people in Washington have told me. What was your theory in
Robertson: That’s just about what I’ve heard in London.

**Blandishments**

Ingersoll: Oh, by the way. We have only got a few minutes left. Did the British Government wine and dine you when you were in London? Do you think it is possible that you succumbed to what Senator Wheeler called British “blandishments”?

Robertson: As correspondents, you are hitting at us in our most sensitive place. We talked about it all the time.

Ingersoll: Of course, I don’t mean that personally, Ben. I just mean that loads of Americans think the British are charming people and that they have a technique of winding innocent foreigners around their fingers.

Robertson: If anybody in a time like this appears pro-British and friendly to the British cause, he opens himself to the accusation that he belongs to the Walter Hines Page school. I tell you, the people who count in this war are too busy to buy champagne. We believe everything we have written from England is based on facts. The British have shown themselves really to be a tough people and a sincere people and they can take it.

Ingersoll: I was interested to note that when I was with you in London for every bona fide member of the upper classes that we met you talked with scores, if not hundreds of simple people or people who were carrying the immediate responsibility of fighting the Nazis by putting out fires, shooting planes down with anti-aircraft and things like that.

Robertson: I always thought that what they had to say about the war was a lot more significant than what Lord Halifax had to say. In London, I got a better understanding of the U.S.A. than I ever had before. I thought a lot about the original pioneers here and what they had fought for and I could see that the Londoners measure up to them in this new kind of war.

Ingersoll: Well, tonight we will have a chance to hear what his Excellency the Ambassador to the Court of St. James has to say about it all. Too bad there’s no way to put 100 or more American correspondents in London and a score of trained military and naval observers on national radio hook-ups, too. I think the American people would find their testimony pretty interesting in making up their minds about the legislation now before Congress.
Robertson: I am afraid the real experts don’t have national radio hook-ups given them. Perhaps they haven’t the sex appeal.