

SHELBY DADE FOOTE

When the eleven-part television series entitled "The Civil War" appeared in the fall of 1990 and again in the summer of 1991, it received the highest ratings in the history of public television. The figure most deeply etched upon the memory of its millions of viewers was Shelby Dade Foote, whose commentaries ran throughout the series. His knowledge of that war was prodigious, in part from the massive research that had gone into the writing of this acclaimed three-volume narrative history of the Civil War published between 1958 and 1974. Beyond mere facts, he spoke of Lee and Jackson and Sherman and Lincoln as if they were members of his own family, believable and fallible humans who had risen to heights of extraordinary courage and endurance. Rarely has history breathed with such immediacy as through the narrative accounts of Shelby Foote.

Although his family moved and lived throughout the South during his youth, he was born in Greenville, Mississippi, and received a large portion of his primary and secondary education there. In Greenville, he befriended the young Walker Percy, destined to become one of America's most eminent novelists and to remain a life-long friend. Following Percy to Chapel Hill in 1935, Foote enrolled at the University of North Carolina and remained as a student for two years, contributing nine stories to the undergraduate publication, Carolina Magazine. Today, this University proudly houses in its Southern Historical Collection the drafts of his works and other papers.

In the years that followed his undergraduate days, Shelby Foote rediscovered the Mississippi delta within his own fiction, transforming Greenville and its Washington County into the mythical Bristol and Jordan County in novels like Follow Me Down (1950), Love in a Dry Season (1951), and Jordan County: A Landscape in Narrative (1954). Other novels and novellas have enlarged and deepened his fictional world.

To Percy he advised in 1948 that he "had better get to work" as a writer, adding: "I mentioned 'work' -- it's the wrong word: because if you're serious, the whole creative process is attended with pleasure in a form which very few people ever know." Two years later he described his own goal as a writer -- again in a letter to Percy: "Some want to teach (or preach): some want to communicate sensation. I suppose I want to share in both of those. Yet I think I know at last what I really want. I want to teach people to see. I want to impart to them a quality of vision."

Through narratives of both history and fiction, Shelby Foote has successfully taught us to see ourselves through our past -- crafting an enduring quality of vision. For this achievement, we proudly summon him back to this campus in order to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Letters.