It’s one of the most famous and cherished photographs in Vanderbilt’s history. Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson. Five balding white men, dressed impeccably in suits and ties, are seated outdoors, obviously posed by photographer Joe Rudis to appear as if lost in conversation. Despite the artifice, the subjects seem relaxed and even playful, what with Moore practically sitting on Tate’s lap, Warren leaning in as if to insert a word edgewise, and the entire group looking to Allen Tate as if expecting a clever remark.

It was a happy moment for the old friends. It was 1956, and after three decades of being ignored by the University, the Fugitives had returned to campus in glory for a colloquium devoted to their literary work.
There is a new generation of English professors at Vanderbilt who have no personal or professional loyalty to the Fugitives and Agrarians, and whose critical perspectives cause them to question Vanderbilt’s long-held reverence for these writers.

“Nothing in Vanderbilt’s history has come anywhere close to the Fugitives and Agrarians in giving it a national reputation,” confirms Paul Conkin, distinguished professor of history, emeritus, and the author of definitive histories of both Vanderbilt University and the Vanderbilt Agrarians, among other scholarly books. “It’s still by far the most significant aspect of Vanderbilt history in the larger university world.” And yet, as Conkin and other members of Vanderbilt’s faculty have noted increasingly over the years, the legacy of these men is decidedly mixed with some very dark corners.

Michael Kreyling, professor of English, has been a member of the Vanderbilt faculty since 1985. His specialty is southern literature, and he has studied and taught the Fugitives and Agrarians for many years. His book, Inventing Southern Literature, discusses how the Fugitives and Agrarians shaped a notion of southern literature in the first place. He admires a certain grudging respect for their achievement as poets in their day (“they were writing the disciplined modern poetry that T.S. Eliot and people like that were pioneering”), but over the years he has come to find their political problems with the political views that many of these writers expressed in I’ll Take My Stand.

“One of the problems with this business is you have to keep rereading these things over and over in the presence of newer and younger colleagues who see things differently,” says Kreyling. “In rereading these things you realize this is a really misogynistic book—this is not a friendly volume to women. First, they certainly testified to a high degree of talent, but more overt, and that is really hard for me. “Warren, he’s a Parnassus material. He’s right up there at the top as far as I’m concerned. And because he was a person who was capable of change, because he did not fossilize in a way, he and his work and his reputation made the transition into the postmodern era. And I’m not sure that’s true of poems like Tate and Ransome. I see them almost as if they’re consciously antique objects in a way. They say something about an era, and they certainly testified to a high degree of talent, a genius level of talent as far as making poems was concerned. But I’m not sure that their work overall has a lot of relevance for students who are still alive and studying literature today.”

The views of Daniels and Kreyling are by no means outside the current academic main stream, according to John Lowe, A’67, poet, literary critic, professor, English professor. Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927); Dead Without Thunder (1930); The World’s Body (1938); The New Criticism (1941); Selected Poems (1945).

Allen Tate (1899-1979) was a poet, literary critic, and university president and was a member of the Fugitives. His books include The South: The New South (1943); The Tennessee River: Rivers of America Series (1946, 1948); Still Rebels, Still Yankees (1957).

John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) was a poet, literary critic, and English professor. His books include Allen Tate (1914-1937); poet, literary critic, English professor. Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927); Dead Without Thunder (1930); The World’s Body (1938); The New Criticism (1941); Selected Poems (1945).

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was a poet, literary critic, and university president and was a member of the Fugitives. His books include Promises: Poems 1922-1947 (1948); Collected Essays (1959).

Vanderbilt Magazine
They stirred the waters intellectually and even politically. They become a needed reference point because they have a voice that’s unique in the complicated attempt to understand our polity and our economy as well as the attempt to deal with the arts and with literature. They have a unique place.

Walter Sullivan, who retired from Vanderbilt in May 2001 after more than 50 years in the English department, is well aware of the different side of the opinion in the teaching of literature at Vanderbilt and on other college campuses. But as a friend and supporter of these new out-of-favor writers, he admits it pains him.

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Repudiated

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The Fugitives are the only ones who have been repudiated,” continues Sullivan. “You must understand, pretty much everybody who was writing in that generation has been repudiated. They don’t like T.S. Eliot because of his politics. We’re no longer judging literature as literature.

You can find something that just about anyone did or said that will disqualify them from all consideration because of our enlightened approach, and I think that’s a bad thing. I believe you ought to judge people in terms of the lives they were living and the milieu in which they were living at that time, but it’s not done anymore.

“Nobody talks about the Agrarians anymore. There’s not much talk about the Fugitives, either, but there’s no comment about the Agrarians except to denigrate them.”

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Those who studied literature at Vanderbilt before, say, 1970 may well agree with Walter Sullivan and wonder what all the fuss could possibly be about. The problems that most scholars have with these writers begin with I’ll Take My Stand, not the poetry of The Fugitive magazine.

“The Fugitives are quite different from the Agrarians,” says Paul Conkin. “They were a group of students and faculty members here who enjoyed literary discussions for several years, and then The Fugitive became the name for the little poetry journal they established.

“There is nothing in the Fugitive poems or in the Fugitives that would indicate any of them would write I’ll Take My Stand. … They did it because of outside criticism and changes in their personal lives. They did become crusaders for the South, and certainly that had not been any aspect of The Fugitive. But when you read the poems, they’re not pro southern; they’re not pro anything. In that sense they’re not political as a whole.”

By 1928, when Harcourt Brace published an anthology of the group’s poems titled Fugitives: An Anthology of Verse, many of the Fugitives had either moved away from Nashville or were too deeply involved in other professions to focus on poetry, particularly pushing for the misleading Tracts Against Communism. Each author wrote in his own way about the South and about his idealized vision of what it was and what it should be, though all of them did ratify an introductory “Statement of Principles” authored by John Crowe Ransom for the book.

Taken as a whole, the Agrarians’ ideas had aspects that people from many walks of life could readily endorse. The writers were firm- ly against modern materialism and the rise of rampant industrialism. They supported family subsistence farms over corporate farming. They were concerned about protecting the rural environment. They feared that man’s natural connection to farming and the rural life was being torn asunder and that, with that trauma, religion and the arts would suffer.

“Their work did not have the impact of the Agrarians except to denigrate them,” says Conkin, “but they were very influential in terms of modern materialism and the rise of rampant industrialism. They supported family subsistence farms over corporate farming. They were concerned about protecting the rural environment. They feared that man’s natural connection to farming and the rural life was being torn asunder and that, with that trauma, religion and the arts would suffer.”

They saw the South as a kind of haven against the kind of traditional values, “explains Don Doyle, Nelson Tyrone Jr. Professor of History and the author of two books on the history of Nashville. “It was a very romantic version of southern literature class these days without lots and lots of African-Americans and women because, frankly, they’re some of the very best writers. So they’re pushing out some of these more minor figures that might have been taught previously and that were taught when I was at Vanderbilt.”

“Let it be said that it’s not just a matter of new women and African-American writers crowding out older, less relevant Fugitives and Agrarians, Lowe adds. “I mean, they’re not politically correct. The way they’re always featured is when they’re at their worst as far as I’m concerned, which is the case in I’ll Take My Stand. The only thing people are going to look at when they study I’ll Take My Stand these days is the racial situation. And they can’t win. I mean, there’s no way they’re in a situation sympathetic at all in the racial situation, and that’s a roadblock because I think in other ways they could come across as people who have something to say to us.”

Racism

In 1925 the famous Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tenn., which pitted the teaching of evolution accounts of life against something the creationists brought with withering criticism upon the South. Though they were intellectually and not committed religious fundamentalists, the ring-leaders of the Fugitives—Ransom, Tate and Davidson—felt they were southerners first and were stung by the barbs of H.L. Menck en and other northern journalists. Ransom, Davidson and Tate began to recognize their common and growing reverence for the South as a distinct region.

Through letters and discussions, they began to formulate a general point of view and, by 1928, began gathering a group of like-minded southern intellectuals to write a book of essays defending rural farming and southern culture from the threat they perceived in the North’s rampant industrialism. As had been the case with The Fugitive, the group they assembled consisted for the most part of men connected with Vanderbilt: Frank Owdeley and Herman Nixon from the history department; Lyle Lanier from psychology; John John Donald Wade from English; Andrew Lytle, a 1925 Vanderbilt graduate and a former contributor to The Fugitive; and Henry B. Kline, a graduate student in English. To the eight with Vanderbilt connections were added John Gould Fletcher, an Arkansas poet who had published in The Fugitive, and the novelist and drama critic Stark Young, then living in New York. In November 1930, Harpt & Brothers published their book, I’ll Take My Stand. The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners, the title being a lyric lifted from the popular 19th-century song “ Dixie.”

The book didn’t quite rise to the level of manifestos because all the authors could never come together to meet and form a consensus of ideas as had The Fugitive’s editorial team. (In fact, the authors had difficulty even agreeing on a title, with Tate and Ransom wanting to add a lyric introductor “Statement of Principles” authored by John Crowe Ransom for the book.)

Takes as a whole, the Agrarians’ ideas had aspects that people from many walks of life could readily endorse. The writers were firmly against modern materialism and the rise of rampant industrialism. They supported family subsistence farms over corporate farming. They were concerned about protecting the rural environment. They feared that man’s natural connection to farming and the rural life was being torn asunder and that, with that trauma, religion and the arts would suffer. They felt they were doing something darting and radical,“ says Conkin, “but they were very influential in terms of modern materialism and the rise of rampant industrialism. They supported family subsistence farms over corporate farming. They were concerned about protecting the rural environment. They feared that man’s natural connection to farming and the rural life was being torn asunder and that, with that trauma, religion and the arts would suffer.”

They saw the South as a kind of haven against the kind of traditional values, “explains Don Doyle, Nelson Tyrone Jr. Professor of History and the author of two books on the history of Nashville. “It was a very romantic version of...
The book imagines a utopian South that hardly acknowledges women or African-Americans. Though it’s important to note that not every contributor to I’ll Take My Stand had an aristocratic vision of an ideal South, most of the book’s contributors imagined a South in which blacks remained forever second-class citizens.

the South, and one that I think they were reading their own virtues into—into a South of old that in many ways continues to hold a powerful grip on American imagination. It’s the idea that the South is a more aristocratic, less capricious, more civilized kind of society that was not just running after the dollar. It’s a very powerful idea."

Described in this way, as it was for decades on college campuses across the South, I’ll Take My Stand seems innocuous at worst, and at best it seems ennobling and civilizing. Unfortunately, between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow, as the Fugitives’ friend T.S. Eliot once mentioned the book’s attitude toward the antebellum South as if it were their birthright and refers to “the menace of the free Negro.”

Conceived as a manifesto defending southern culture and rural farming, I’ll Take My Stand was largely ignored. The collection of essays formed the basis for charges of racism against the authors.

Further Reading
The Jesse W. Wills Fugitive and Agrarian Collection

When The Fugitive magazine was being published between 1922 and 1925, no more than about 200 people ever subscribed. Among those who pointedly refused was James Kirkland, Vanderbilt’s chancellor at the time. But the University did not entirely ignore the upstart poetry magazine that was published by a group consisting mostly of Vanderbilt English professors and students; the Vanderbilt Library subscribed almost from the beginning.

Today the library has several complete runs (19 issues) of the hard-to-find magazine, each run easily worth upwards of $20,000 on the rare book market today. The library also has the handwritten accounting ledger that Fugitive member Alec Stevenson maintained, showing in neat script every subscriber to The Fugitive, including the Vanderbilt Library.

These items are just a small part of the single largest cache of Fugitive/Agrarian materials available anywhere: the Heard Library’s Jesse W. Wills Fugitive and Agrarian Collection. Today the Wills Collection encompasses more than 1,600 books and monographs by and about the Fugitives and Agrarians, as well as a voluminous collection of the writers’ letters, papers and published magazine articles. The collection was established at Vanderbilt in 1969 with the financial and collecting assistance of its namesake, the late Jesse Wills, a member of the Fugitives who went on to a career as an insurance executive and served as a member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

Located in the Special Collections department of the Heard Library, the Wills Collection ranges in scope from first editions of all published works by the Fugitives and Agrarians to more than 200 theses and dissertations written about them. Also included within the collection are such unique resources as the working library of John Crowe Ransom, original typescripts and carbon copies of poems the Fugitives wrote and discussed in their group meetings, and the original manuscripts for I’ll Take My Stand.

“Our goal is to collect all the scholarly works about and by the Fugitives and Agrarians, as well as the second generation of writers who were their protégés, such as poets Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell,” says Kathy Smith, associate university archivist, who has worked with Special Collections in the Heard Library for the past six years.

Although the Wills Collection is more than 30 years old and the Fugitives and Agrarians are all deceased, it continues to expand and, in fact, has grown substantially in recent years, thanks to additional gifts from the Wills family and the Friends of the Library. “Some people may think that we’ve collected all that we can because we’ve got such a comprehensive collection, but I truly believe there is more material out there and that, by careful collecting, we can trace these layers of influence—for instance, how Allen Tate influenced Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell,” says Smith.

Smith says she continues to see a steady stream of visitors examining the holdings. These researchers range from the occasional undergraduate from Vanderbilt and other universities to master’s and doctoral candidates, not only from the U.S. but also from overseas.

“Sometimes people think the materials have been fully researched,” says Smith, “but it’s still a lively collection. There’s still a lot of intellectual discovery going on about what these men were thinking and what they were trying to impart.” — Paul Kingsbury

For more information on Special Collections’ holdings on the Fugitives and Agrarians, visit www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/.

— Paul Kingsbury