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Ike McCaslin and the Wilderness

by Malcolm Cowley

Among the hundreds of characters that Faulkner brought to light the one most argued about is Uncle Ike McCaslin. And there's no wonder that he has been the subject of more argument even than Joe Christmas, because critics keep judging him by one of two opposed systems of values—one interior, the other exterior. One, holding that a man is to be judged for what he is in his heart; the other, holding that a man is to be judged by what his effect is on the social community. So that, by the one system of values, Ike McCaslin ranks high; by the other system of values, as we shall see, he ranks low. But let us see how this man was born and changed and came to maturity.

He was born in October, 1867, when his father Theophilus (I think it must have been pronounced Tyeophylus, because they keep calling him Phylus), Theophilus McCaslin was sixty-eight years old and had served very lately in the Civil War and in Forrest's cavalry. And there was a twin brother, Uncle Buddy. And Uncle Buddy and Uncle Buck, that's Theophilus, had been in a practical way abolitionists by freeing most of their own slaves gradually and without fuss or bother. Ike lost his father in 1873, at the age of six, and lost his mother a year or two afterward. He was fathered by his second cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, called Cass Edmonds, about sixteen years older than he was, but also by Sam Fathers, the son of a Negro slave woman and a Chickasaw chief. Sam Fathers taught him very young to shoot rabbits and such, and then at the age of ten he was privileged to enter the wilderness for the first time. And that entering of the wilderness was for him a second birth, because, well, that's a passage really worth reading again. That's on account of, shall we say, the obstetrical images connected with it. He said, "He entered it." That was the wilderness.

He entered his novitiate to the true wilderness with Sam beside him as he had begun his apprenticeship in miniature to manhood after the rabbits and such with Sam beside him, the two of them wrapped in the damp, warm, negro-rank quilt while the wilderness closed behind his entrance as it had

opened momentarily to accept him, opening before his advancement as it closed behind his progress, no fixed path the wagon followed but a channel non-existent ten yards ahead of it and ceasing to exist ten yards after it had passed, the wagon progressing not by its own volition but by attrition of their intact yet fluid circumambience, drowsing, earless, almost lightless.

It seemed to him that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth.

So that's the first theme, rebirth into the wilderness. Then the next event actually is his seeing Old Ben, who is the spirit of the wilderness. But by his eleventh birthday, one year after this, he killed a buck, and Sam Fathers made him cut its throat, dipped his fingers in the blood and wiped them across his cheek, perhaps in a cross. Well, that was the rite of baptism. And his seeing the bear before that has been called an epiphany. There are religious overtones to everything that is happening in here. So, at the age of sixteen he joins in the final hunt in which the bear is killed, not by a bullet, there being fifty-two bullets under his hide that hadn't affected him, but by a knife, and not by a pure white man, but by a partly Chickasaw no-good named Boon Hogganbeck. All this is happening in a way that we feel is right, not from our intellect but from a sort of instinct of how a fairy tale is told.

Then, at the age of sixteen, too, very close to the time of the final hunt for the bear, Ike opens the ledgers in the commissary and finds for the first time the story of his family, finds that his grandfather Carothers—Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin—had bought a slave girl in New Orleans, had had a child by her, then had summoned that very child to his bed, that was Tomasina, whereupon the mother committed suicide. And Ike had grown up, more or less, close to Tomey's Turl, that's Tomasina's Terrell, who was actually his uncle. So, this event changes his world, changes his system of values. He feels from that time forth that there is a guilt attached to the family and attached to the land they own.

And when he is twenty-one years old, just after his birthday, you have in this long fourth section of "The Bear" the scene between Uncle Ike and his second cousin Cass, Cass Edmonds, in which he says that he is going to relinquish the land. And he finds it hard to explain why he is relinquishing. He brings forward a whole series of reasons for it. First, the land never belonged to him because it never belonged to his grandfather, because you couldn't buy land, because God had intended that man should hold land in common simply by

endurance and the sweat of his brow. And Cass cuts him off and says, "Nevertheless, Grandfather did own it." And then, coming forward, he says to Cass again, "I don't know why I must do it but I do know I have got to because I have got myself to have to live with for the rest of my life and all I want is peace to do it in." So then gradually he explains; no, he doesn't explain. The cousin knows about it, too—the curse that hangs on—that he thinks hangs on—the family from his grandfather's guilt.

And then he explains more at length how he reads the Bible and how he thought that after God had failed in Europe to set up a truly communal society where nobody owned land, He, with the help of a simple aide, discovered America. And people came there once more to try to set up a free society. And nevertheless because of slavery, that simple word "slavery," there was an injustice attached to the land so that God brought about a Civil War to teach the South a lesson in pride and humility, pride and humility being the two key words for the lesson that Ike had learned from Sam Fathers. So, in that way, the long fourth part of "The Bear" is woven back into the narrative. Ike wouldn't have relinquished if it hadn't been for the lesson he learned in the wilderness. And he says near the end, but not at the end, of the fourth section, "Yes, Sam Fathers set me free."

Now, this relinquishment, this refusal to accept land that is tainted both with the guilt of his grandfather's unfeeling treatment of his slaves and also at the same time with slavery itself, is something that the critics have argued about from the beginning. And for the pro-Ike side of the criticism, read this by R. W. B. Lewis, in a useful collection called *Bear, Man and God*: "The total change at work in 'The Bear' may thus in these various respects [which he's been discussing] be compared to the transition from the pagan to the Christian era, if not from the Old to the New Testament . . . This is not to say that Ike is intended to represent Christ in a second coming, but only that Ike moves in a world of light, a light still meager but definite, a new world in which values have been confirmed by being raised to a higher power, not the new world beyond the frontier, that is precisely what is transcended, but a world so perpetually new that Ike sometimes seems to be its only living inhabitant."

After the scene in the commissary, after the relinquishment, Ike went to Jefferson, rented a room in a dismal boarding house, accepted thirty dollars a month from Cass Edmonds as a loan, not as a

gift or a repayment for the farm, and became a carpenter because it seemed to him in, both in pride and in humility, that if carpentering was enough for Jesus Christ, well, it was all right for Ike McCaslin, too. Then, at the end of the section, he marries. His wife, a rather frigid, ambitious woman, insists that he reclaim the plantation; and, when he refuses, she refuses to bear him sons. So, Ike will spend the rest of his life childless; "Uncle to half the county, father to none," Faulkner says.

Now, these events seem not entirely Christ-like in their results. And we find in the next chapter or story in *Go Down, Moses*, "Delta Autumn," a further confirmation that this man is something less than a Christ-figure, for he's setting off to the Delta with his, by now, fourth cousin, I suppose, Roth Edmonds. And he cannot even persuade Roth not to shoot a doe, to obey the laws of hunting in the big woods. And furthermore, Roth gives him money to give to—"Somebody'll come for it," Roth said. And the somebody turns out to be the last descendant of Carothers McCaslin on the black side. And Roth has had an affair with her, and the result is a baby. And she doesn't want to take the money. And she turns then to Uncle Ike and says,

"I would have made a man of him. He's not a man yet. You spoiled him. You, and Uncle Lucas and Aunt Mollie. But mostly you."

"Me?" he said. "Me?"

"Yes, when you gave to his grandfather that land which didn't belong to him, not even half of it by will or even law."

So, she judges his act severely as Lucas had already judged it as a weakness in "The Fire and the Hearth," and as General Compson had suspected that it was weakness. And then, finally, the girl passes one final comment to him, "Old man," she says, "have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" And then she's gone.

So this, again, doesn't show Ike in a role of the Christ-figure. And he appears in other books by Faulkner. He's mentioned in *Intruder in the Dust*. He's mentioned in a short story called "A Bear Hunt," collected in *Big Woods*, not a very good story. He's mentioned in *The Mansion*, in which the events seem to be taking place about 1946 or 1947; and Ike is still alive at that time at the age of, let's see, well over eighty by then. And he's mentioned finally in a story called "Race at

Morning,” which is a better story than “A Bear Hunt,” and which contains Faulkner’s implicit judgment on Ike. In *The Mansion* we learn that about the year 1908, he was junior partner in a hardware store and refused to sell buckshot to Mink Snopes, who wanted to use the buckshot to kill Jack Houston. And Ike didn’t know that was his purpose, but he told him he wouldn’t sell him buckshot on credit because there was nothing out at Frenchman’s Bend to use buckshot on. And then, later in the book you hear that it has become the McCaslin Hardware Store, that he’s taken a partner who is also a hunter and fisherman; and the partner has gradually taken the business over from him, though Ike sometimes appears in the store when he isn’t off hunting or fishing. And finally the hardware store passes into the hands of Jason Compson.

So, again, if he is an angel, he’s an ineffectual angel. We can pass the judgment on him that, of the two deepest feelings Uncle Ike had—the first for the wilderness and the second about the injustice being done to the blacks in Mississippi—he didn’t succeed in saving one acre of wilderness and, having given up his plantation and being a man of no wealth and no influence except in the hunt, he was not able to help the blacks in Mississippi. So that whatever happened with him happened inside him. And that, again, has been the cause of, oh, dear me, some very violent attacks on Uncle Ike. There’s one reprinted in this book called *Ike McCaslin: Cop-Out*, by David H. Stewart. And what you might call the operative sentence reads as follows: “What he achieves is little more than cheap self-satisfaction—cheap because his basic urge is to gain peace and to escape, which prevents him from finding solutions that really satisfy or are really meaningful.” Well, Stewart makes dozens of errors in this piece, which come just from careless reading—errors about giving the money back to the descendants of Tomey’s Terrell, and other mistakes about how old Ike was when he did various things. There’s just a revelation that the man is reading carelessly. But he makes one more important error, which is that he takes for granted that Uncle Ike is a spokesman for the author himself; so when he’s condemning Uncle Ike, he’s also condemning Faulkner.

Now, that question, whether or not Uncle Ike is speaking for Faulkner, is quite a complicated question. One can’t say yes or no. Faulkner would and did say no. He said, “I don’t have spokesmen in my books.” He said, “I create characters.” He didn’t say “create,” he

said, "I just put down characters, and they talk for themselves and I don't always approve of what they say but I let them say it." And that is true. His imagination was dramatic, almost Shakespearian. He created these people; some of them spoke with more conviction than others. But they didn't necessarily say what Faulkner believed at the time. This applies even to characters like Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!*, who seems to be speaking for Faulkner, or to Gavin Stevens or to all his favorite characters. No, Faulkner doesn't approve of them; he thinks they are real and he lets them talk for themselves and he specifically disowned Uncle Ike in the sense of speaking for him. But the question that I will return to, a little later, is more complicated than that.

Faulkner passed judgment on Uncle Ike on two occasions. Once he said, "Well, I think that a man ought to do more than just repudiate; he should've been more affirmative instead of shunning people." And again he said, "Old Isaac, in a sense, said what a man would, had turned apostate to his name and lineage, by weakly relinquishing the land which was rightfully his." That's a pretty severe judgment, and you can see it's supported, in some respects, by what Ike is doing when he appears in the later stories and novels. And one might think, too, that Faulkner himself did not share Uncle Ike's relinquishment and repudiation. When his father died in 1932, he became head of the Faulkner family, to watch out for his brothers and their children, and he did this sometimes at a considerable financial sacrifice. The question is, would he have had to go to Hollywood and work there three or four years at a low salary, squandering his talent on grade B movies for the most part? Would he have had to do that without his sense of responsibility which urged him not only to help the family but to keep up the land he now owned, to keep up payments, mortgages, his farm out in the country that you saw yesterday. So, for that, he sacrificed three or four years. And it was a sacrifice that not only cost him dear but cost the world dear, because there might have been other great books at the time after finishing *Go Down, Moses*, which carried him in some respects beyond any point that he had reached before. So, the land meant a great deal to Faulkner, and the family meant a great deal. Responsibility meant a great deal, and he would never relinquish or abdicate or resign.

But that again is not the whole story. Think of this, think of

various things in him of the two systems of value. Simply because Ike had no effect on the community, except to teach boys the laws of hunting and the art of hunting and the duty of it—a little of the lore that had passed down to him from Sam Fathers and to Sam Fathers from the Indians who originally owned the land. Except for that, one can trace few actual benefits to society of the life of Uncle Ike, and yet I think there were benefits. There are benefits that are intangible. He really did achieve a different level of consciousness. And he really did live according to his lights, with a sort of inner peace that one notes even in "Delta Autumn," where he is very unhappy about his kinsman.

And furthermore, we can say, "No, he is not Faulkner's spokesman," and yet from the first time I read that fourth part of "The Bear," something about the very rhythms of the speech of young Ike McCaslin to Cass Edmonds made me think that they represented very deep feelings on the part of Faulkner. Starting out with the conventional view of the blacks in Mississippi, as expressed in *Sartoris*, published in 1929, gradually he was becoming more and more troubled in conscience. And those conscientious questions affected him—they must have affected him when he was writing what Uncle Ike said about the injustice of the two races on the land; one of them tied to the land, only one free. But the one tied to the land, they will endure. And he made at that time, Ike did, an enormous statement. Where is that? That enormous statement that—you know, it's with regard to the black race in Mississippi. The one that ends up, "They will endure." And "They are better than we are"—that was the enormous statement for Ike McCaslin to make or for Faulkner to make at that time. And reading that passage, one comes more and more to feel that Faulkner could not have written this unless it represented a very deep feeling on his part. And then what if, at the end of "Delta Autumn," he does this sort of cop-out, in this sense, that he decides that he hasn't saved any of the wilderness, and then he decides that there was just enough of it so that he and the wilderness would live out and die together, he dying as the bear had died, as Sam Fathers had died, when the last of the wilderness went. But it wouldn't be lost forever because all these things existed in the deep, black soil, and were alive in the soil, just as Old Ben, the bear, was really alive there; and they'd give him back his paws so the wilderness all would be recreated in the myth of eternal return.

Well, that's a mythical compensation for a real loss, and yet it does have poetic value, at least. And in that same passage of "Delta Autumn," there is one event that has to me tremendous symbolic value, and if Faulkner hadn't felt deeply some of the things that Uncle Ike was saying, or young Ike was saying, to Cass Edmonds, I don't know that this symbol would have occurred to him, because at the end there is the horn bound with silver that had once belonged to General Compson and that General Compson had given to Ike and that he had carried now for sixty years in the woods, until it has become a sort of, what shall you say, almost a crown or a totem or a cachina or an image of the spirit, you see, the mana of the family, the virtue of the family. And Ike gives this hunter's horn to the baby, the illegitimate child of Roth and the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim, so that by this act the author is suggesting that the mana and virtue of the family have passed now from the white to the Negro line. In fact, this baby is the last descendant of Old Carothers McCaslin, who took the land in the beginning. And the two lines are once again united there. Incidentally, there is a wonderful ending to the "Delta Autumn" when they come back to get a tarpaulin to haul a deer in on, and Uncle Ike says, "Roth shot a deer. What kind of deer?" "Oh, just a deer." And Uncle Ike says, "It was a doe." So that, in the very last line of the story, he's tied together the two themes of *Go Down, Moses*: the theme of injustice to the blacks and miscegenation on the one side and the theme of the wilderness and the humility and pride and courage demanded of the hunter on the other side. And just in that one word, "doe," it's all summarized.

You know, since there's a movie to be shown, I think I'll cut my talk for this evening short. I could talk more about Ike, but I'm not going to. These are the important points, you see. The place where I was weakest was in the lessons that Ike learns, learns in the wilderness from Sam Fathers and which you must always watch out for, those two words "humility" and "pride"—two words which Faulkner in his person took very much to heart. I think he was the proudest man I ever knew, and yet the pride went along with no false pride, even with the sort of humility that he had also learned. And pride and humility plus courage were learned from the wilderness.

And again, I should have told you that Cass Edmonds is not a villain in here, that Faulkner is fair to his side of the argument, as well as to Uncle Ike's side, and, in fact, in his own person, leaned more toward Cass Edmonds' interpretation than toward Uncle Ike's,

at least in his life. And, one more thing that I might have said and failed to develop is the changing in Faulkner, not only from 1930 to December, 1941, when he actually finished "The Bear." Now, "The Bear" was finished just about the time of Pearl Harbor, an event which deeply, deeply affected Faulkner, that affected everybody else on earth at that time, but Faulkner more than others because he's a man of simple patriotism, outside of everything else. But after 1942, instead of writing novels that were intensely private about the adventures, really the moral adventures of characters who are outside of society—under society if they lived in Frenchman's Bend, outside of it if they were like Miss Reba and her house in Memphis—instead of writing about characters like this, in Hollywood he became more and more interested in public questions and more and more determined to do his part and his best on those questions. Some of his letters quoted in Mr. Blotner's biography from Hollywood about the discrimination against the blacks are really very, very strong stuff. And then from that time on, Faulkner became more a public man. And I think that perhaps has something to do with his harsh judgment of Uncle Ike. That is, he conceived Uncle Ike while he was still an intensely private man; and after he became more interested in the problems of the world and the problems of mankind and of his country, then he judged Uncle Ike more harshly because Ike had been so ineffective in everything.

One other point: Ike was less effective than his own father and uncle—Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy, who had really, by holding on to their plantation and running it after a fashion, been very good to the blacks whom they owned and whom they manumitted one after another. They were effective; they were working in the world, whereas the change in Ike was an internal thing. And those who set a value on levels of consciousness and on the salvation of the individual will judge Ike more leniently or more admiringly than those who require political action. It is rather as in colleges eight or ten years ago, when the far-out young people were divided between the Marxists and the Zen Buddhists. The Zen Buddhists would judge Ike more admiringly than the Marxists would, would they not? I think there is something to be said for both, and also I think that we should hold the thing in balance and see that Faulkner, as an intensely dramatic writer, was trying to present a man for us to wonder at, rather than to enforce a point of view.

Thank you.