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ROBERT WILLIAM HAYNES*

Replacing the Romantic Plantation: Horton Foote's Dramatic Engagement from *Gone with the Wind* (*The Musical*) to *Convicts*

Abstract

Harold Rome's musical version of *Gone with the Wind* was staged in 1972-3 in London, and, though not financially successful, it had a creditable onstage run. Texas playwright Horton Foote adapted Margaret Mitchell's very popular novel for this project, bringing with him a solid record of dramatic writing, including the Oscar-winning screenplay for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This paper describes Foote's involvement with this musical production and his own personal situation during this time, showing how this experience contributed to his subsequent accomplishments. He was in fact a distant relative of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* affected the South much more violently than any other novel has, and his own descent from a wealthy Texas planter gave him a unique perspective on the burst of British enthusiasm for Confederate culture. Foote's personal understanding of the lasting impact of slavery upon his home region conflicted with the *Gone with the Wind* project's sentimental vision and motivated him to develop his own dramatic description of the plantation and its unromantic reality in his play *Convicts*, the second drama of his great nine-play *Orphans' Home Cycle*. In this play, the most significant music is that of the legendary blues guitarist Leadbelly. This essay describes the sometimes-ludicrous history of the London show and goes on to explain Foote's subsequent confrontation of negotiations between his great-great-grandfather 'Governor' Albert C. Horton (1798-1865) and Louisa Picquet, a former slave, who strove to purchase her still-enslaved mother from Horton. The outcome of this transaction inspired Foote to create Soll Gautier, the half-crazed plantation owner in *Convicts*, a savage character no one would associate with moonlight and magnolias.

KEYWORDS: Horton Foote; *Gone with the Wind*; Margaret Mitchell; Harold Rome; plantation; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; musical; London; Albert C. Horton; *Convicts*; *Orphans' Home Cycle*

Horton Foote's home region of Southeast Texas, unlike other parts of that state, shares the geographic and social attributes of the cotton-farm-

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ing Deep South, and his plays and screenplays reflect that heritage.¹ Foote grew up in this cotton country, in which an ancestor of his had been a wealthy and influential planter, and his own awareness of the various forms of injustice perpetuated by the plantation system intensified as his career brought him in mid-life to the task of adapting Margaret Mitchell's best-selling novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) as a London musical extravaganza. Later, with the hollow echoes of British Confederate thunder still in his ears, he would write his own plantation play, a work titled *Convicts*, which sets forth a very different view of plantation life, a view grounded in the boyhood experience of Foote's father.

Among the transformations of *Gone with the Wind*, the most significant was the 1939 film starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, which won eight competitive Academy Awards, but there have been other versions as well. One of those adaptations, the musical production staged in London in 1972-3, starred Harve Presnell and June Ritchie, and it was Texas writer Horton Foote, who had won an Oscar for his script for the 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who wrote the book for the program. This show had originated in Japan, where its title was *Scarlett*. Harold Rome wrote the music for this four-hour program, and *Scarlett* was successful enough to be thought worthy of adaptation for production elsewhere. Budgetary considerations made London a more desirable venue than the American possibilities, and thus the promoters of the show arranged for it to be adapted and re-titled for a 1972 opening as *Gone with the Wind*. Efforts were made to fill the cast with British actors (after all, Vivien Leigh was English), but the part of leading man Rhett Butler was won by Californian Harve Presnell. To assure some authenticity of dialect, Horton Foote was employed. His descent from a leading plantation owner in his home state may or may not have been known at the time, but the articulate gentility of Atticus Finch's discourse in *Mockingbird* had had a somewhat redemptive effect upon the South's reputation some ten years earlier. The Japanese *Scarlett* had not needed such authenticity, but, as it turned out, Foote was available, and his talent and character had been proclaimed as superlative by Harper Lee, the writer nearest in Southern fame and public success to Margaret Mitchell.

British theatrical producer Harold Fielding believed the romantic dimensions of Mitchell's popular novel about the individuals caught up in the rise and fall of the Confederacy would attract large audiences, justifying the expense of an elaborate production which the author of his obituary in the *Telegraph* refers to once as "arrestingly spectacular" and again as

¹ In his memoir *Beginnings*, Foote estimated that he had written "over sixty" plays and thirteen screenplays (270). Some scholars who have worked in his archive are inclined to believe that the number of his plays is considerably higher.

“unrelentingly spectacular” (“Harold Fielding” 2003). Perhaps he thought that the gentlemanly Confederates of a century earlier would offer an attractive fictional alternative to the contemporary Americans with their free-fire zones in Vietnam, but, whatever his view of political matters, he chose to gamble on the appeal of an established story he hoped to make yet more charming by musical delights.

In 1972, Horton Foote found himself in need of work that would help him meet the expenses of his family. He had had much beneficial employment since *To Kill a Mockingbird* had made him famous in film circles ten years earlier but writing assignments for him had grown scarcer as the theatre had plunged into experimentation and sensationalism and as his own unobtrusive kind of drama had fallen from fashion. The offer to write the book for the *Gone with the Wind* show was thus timely for him, and he was confident that his contribution would be valued as it had not been on a previous trip to England. In that earlier transatlantic expedition, Foote and his family had spent a summer in England as Horton worked on a script for Otto Preminger's film *Hurry Sundown* (1967), which was based on the 1964 novel by 'K. B. Gilden' (the pen name used by writers Katya and Bert Gilden). Though Preminger told Foote that he liked his script, he also decided not to use it, but he did ask to be allowed to list Foote as co-author of the screenplay. Foote, who liked Preminger, consented, though as time went by, he frequently disavowed any contribution to the work, which presented Southern racial injustice and resistance to it. Though Foote opposed prejudice and injustice and knew much about both, he tended to resist the stereotypical representation of Southerners and indeed the demonization of any group.

His later sojourn in London engaged him in work on a show transmogrifying a story dear to the hearts of those with a sentimental weakness for the ante-bellum South, including, of course, many of Foote's associates and family members. The London location must have been at times an odd place for a rural-born Southerner to formulate plantation dialogue for Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, but Foote did need the money, and he was familiar with the business of moving a show forward under various forms of pressure. His first real stage job after arriving nearly penniless in New York in 1935 had been a non-speaking part in the spectacular Max Reinhardt production *The Eternal Road*, which began rehearsals in late 1936, and young Foote had earned the magnificent sum of \$25 a week scurrying about, silently miming Egyptians here and Hebrews there to the music of Kurt Weill, while singers including Lotte Lenya harmonized in what Brooks Atkinson called “a glorious pageant of great power and beauty” (Atkinson 1937). Later, of course, Foote had become one of the leading writers of the ‘Golden Age of Television’, putting together scripts for live produc-

tion and achieving some memorable contributions to this new form of entertainment. He had written his first screenplay, *Storm Fear*, an adaptation of a not-very-thrilling thriller, in 1955, and had, with the Oscar for *Mockingbird*, drawn to himself the attention of such figures as Otto Preminger. And through all of this diverse activity Foote remained as active as possible in writing stage plays, so there was nothing in the London project that challenged him artistically. The challenges facing him were personal ones related both to family and to his sense of identity as writer.

In 1972, Foote's parents were declining in health at their Texas home while Horton and his wife sought to deal with the sometimes-difficult choices made by their four children, now ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-two, back home in New Hampshire. Their eldest son was eligible for the military draft at this time, with a dangerous Vietnam assignment a real possibility for all conscripts. He eventually decided to enlist, which gave him an alternative to being sent to a combat zone, but the anxiety accompanying this process added greatly to his father's distractions at the time the London project offered a solution to pressing financial challenges. The late 1960s and early 1970s were of course full of social conflict, with civil rights, resistance to the war, and public anger about governmental misbehaviour occupying the public mind.

Though Foote had been tough enough to earn his dramaturgic spurs in Depression New York, his writing life now required more than personal fortitude, as family concerns and the necessity of a transatlantic separation posed formidable obstacles. Foote's level-headed wife Lillian, as always in their long marriage, held the fort and provided both guidance and encouragement, and Foote's loyal agent Lucy Kroll, already a friend of thirty years' standing, provided helpful publicity and steadily sought new opportunities for him. Both women, incidentally, regarded Foote's dramatic work with keen respect. It was Lillian who had persuaded Horton to take on the *To Kill a Mockingbird* screenplay assignment, and Lucy Kroll's energetic advocacy of her friend's art was monumental, as her archives at the Library of Congress testify.

And there were further concerns which had their effects upon the playwright's imagination at this time. At the space of a decade from his greatest success, the Academy Award for the Harper Lee film, Foote remained aware that his abiding artistic strength lay in an imaginative exploration of the past, with all its illusions, real and bogus attractions, and its often-ignored cruelties. The world presented by the musical version of *Gone with the Wind* was familiar to him as a Southerner descended from plantation owners, but it was alien to him as well, and not only because of the British environment, in which his mastery of the drawl – a pronunciation he had worked long and hard to lose in his days in drama school in California

– placed him in a special way in the fictitious fabrication at hand. The ante-bellum fantasy was also alien because the romantic presentation of this dream world was very much at odds with his own informed understanding of what life was like on a plantation. He felt the disparity between the popular enthusiasm for ante-bellum chivalry and the historical consequences of the slavery system that had made plantations possible. His stint on the elaborate semi-opera *The Eternal Road* had shown him the application of dramatic art and music to a critical social issue, but in *Gone with the Wind*, he saw little more than misconceived sentimentality. Of course, as a professional, he charged forward and did his best, just as in his student days he had played a lead role in blackface in Paul Green's play *The No 'Count Boy*, and as he would later read the lines of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in the celebrated Ken Burns TV series *The Civil War*.

Foote's contribution to the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been a controversial declaration of sympathy for the civil rights movement. Though he would vigorously maintain later that he had only missed the 1963 Academy Awards ceremony because he had thought he had no chance of winning, we need to remember the emotional climate of 1963, the year Medgar Evers was murdered in June and John Kennedy was murdered in November. Though the author of this essay was twelve that year, living near the Florida line in Georgia, which is about as deep in the Deep South as one can get, he remembers well the anxiety and nearly universal public anger of those days. As a native of a small town in Texas, Foote may well have felt that he should be with his family as this film competed for Oscars. In any case, his family history gave him sufficient cause to deplore his region's hostility to the civil rights movement.

Foote's great-great-grandfather was Albert Clinton Horton, who as a Texas pioneer and early statesman had acquired considerable wealth in agriculture after fighting against Mexico and serving as the first elected lieutenant-governor of the new state. Though some contemporary detractors complained that Horton, who had narrowly missed being massacred with Colonel Fannin's soldiers at Goliad in 1836, was no hero and should have led his handful of men in an Alamo-esque suicide attack on the Mexican army, public opinion generally favoured the man, and his generosity was memorialized by the \$5000 donation he made for the foundation of what is now Baylor University. Visitors to the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas, can still ring a large bell donated in 1858 by A.C. Horton to what was then Baylor Female Seminary. Horton's extensive landholdings made him a major figure in Texas agriculture, and, of course, his plantations were sustained by slave labour.²

² The best summary of Horton's career is still that of Ellenberger 1985, though more

Various records have survived describing Albert C. Horton's dealings with his slaves. One such document maintains that as a master he showed considerable compassion and concern for the souls of those whose bodies he owned. In an account of Horton's conduct toward the religious life of his slaves, Baptist leader Rufus C. Burleson wrote:

Nothing ever impressed me more than his tender and deep interest for the comfort and religious welfare of his slaves. He owned nearly 300 – a large number of them members of the Baptist Church. He made a church house, built convenient between his plantations, and employed a preacher to preach for them. Bro. Noah Hill, his pastor, said it was the most touching scene he ever saw to see Gov. Horton and his noble wife reading the Bible and praying for their servants. (1901: 711)

Another less laudatory source is the book *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*, published in New York in 1861 by the abolitionist minister Hiram Mattison. This text consists of interviews of the former slave Louisa Picquet by Mattison, with commentary by the latter. Louisa's mother Elizabeth Ramsey had been sold with her many years earlier, with different buyers purchasing each. Louisa managed to become free later, and soon began a search for her mother, who she remembered had been bought by a Texan named Horton. She eventually located the man, who was 'Governor' Albert C. Horton (by Texas tradition, lieutenant governors can be called governor, besides which Horton had served as acting governor in 1846 while the person elected to that post was fighting in Mexico). She was able to write to her mother and then to Horton, whom she asked to allow her to purchase her mother's freedom.³ Horton replied that he would sell Louisa's mother for one thousand dollars, and the younger woman soon began recruiting assistance and trying to raise this seemingly impossible sum. Some Northerners refused aid because Louisa Picquet did not look as they thought an African American woman should look, and one minister who was approached in vain was Henry Ward Beecher, who was, like his famous sister (the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), distantly kin to the future playwright Horton Foote. With funds slowly accumulating but not yet approaching the required sum, an appeal was made to Eliza Horton, Albert's wife, and she reduced Elizabeth Ramsey's price to \$900, an amount Louisa and her associates were able to assemble, thus enabling the liberation of Ms. Ramsey. Though the swashbuckling image of 'Governor' Horton still conveys associations of Texas' victory over Mexico, the story of his conduct in this matter of a young woman's love for her

recent work such as Fisher 2014, for example, should also be consulted.

³ For a full discussion of Louisa Picquet's struggle, see Pitts 2007.

mother necessarily qualifies any jingoistic glow his name might provoke.

Add to this his great-great-grandson's recollection in Foote's autobiographical volume *Farewell*:

On a fourteen-mile hike to complete some phase of becoming a Boy Scout, I stopped in a country store near Iago for a bottle of soda water. On the gallery of the store was an elderly black man, and as I drank my soda water we got to talking. When I told him my name, he said he had been born a slave on my great-great-grandfather's plantation. I have never forgotten the impact that made on me. Slavery, up until that time, had been an abstract statistic in other people's stories: . . . But as I looked into that man's tired, sorrowful face, I was shocked to realize that this abstraction, spoken of so lightly, was a living, suffering human being. The tales of the past bore a new reality after that. (Foote 1999: 128)

The Horton Foote commissioned to write the libretto for the 1972 London version of *Gone with the Wind* was thus an artist who had meditated deeply on slavery and its effects both on slaves and their owners. He was not about to defy the expectations of a hoop-skirt-hungry public and ruin the sales of mint juleps and sabres, but one wonders if at the raising of the large onstage carpet to reveal on its lower side a huge Confederate battle flag Foote did not at least briefly think of Leni Riefenstahl and the ideology her art sought to serve. In fact, there is some circumstantial evidence that the playwright's sense of the Old South was focused by his English experience, a theme that will be further discussed later.

Well, the show went on, with vast fuss and bother, a grand opening, an appearance by a member of the royal family, and a certain hopeful inclination on the parts of certain journalists to celebrate the popularizing genius of Harold Fielding, the strong showing in Japan of the earlier version of the show, which was titled *Scarlett*, and the manifestly spectacular stage effects which were intended to carry the program. Horton Foote thriftily accumulated enough funds to fly his wife to London for the last couple of weeks of his stay, and the show went on, with Princess Anne greeting the acting company on the first night and the Foote family departing the next day for their home in New Hampshire.

Some of the early reviews were mixed, with Ronald Bryden in the *New York Times* praising the first half of the show but finding in the second half "a soapy odor of synthetic romance". He concludes:

The only points at which Joe Layton's production seems likely to be memorable in its own right are its dances and some of its swift, spectacular staging. But as he says, his "Gone with the Wind" isn't aimed at critics, but at the boxoffice. There, it's obviously as unstoppable as Sherman's army. (Bryden 1972)

However, it was the negative reviews that prevailed, with Clive Barnes huffily proclaiming, "The show, staged by Joe Layton, is mildly spectacular, and spectacularly uninteresting" (Barnes 1972). The most savage of these reviews was that of Rex Reed, whose indignation fired him to some very amusing observations, most of which contained utter disdain for what he saw as a ridiculous program. He sets the scene for his massacre by describing "the old Drury Lane, where a mighty cannon pointed toward the sky, Cockney actors sang 'Dixie' in Confederate uniforms, and British debutantes in hoop skirts greeted the arriving celebrities and critics by passing out Confederate flags while a Dixieland band played 'Old Black Joe'". He goes on to itemize aspects of the performance he finds inept or ludicrous, noting "I can remember nothing in my theater-going history I consider a bigger disaster" (Reed 1972).

All of the critics who saw the first night's performance were obliged to comment on one particular moment, which Reed describes with some vigour. He writes:

The biggest show-stopping moment on opening night occurred as Scarlett tried to drag a horse with stage fright across the swamps back to Tara in the wake of war. "I will go!" she kept shouting, but only the horse did. The audience screamed with laughter and applause as the poor nag filled the stage with fresh manure. Then the mad soldier who tried to attack Scarlett from behind a tree fell dead from her gunfire under the curtain line. "I'll never go hungry again," wept the brave actress who played Scarlett as the corpse, seeing the first-act curtain falling, rolled over to keep from being killed. Naturally, he rolled right into the horse's main contribution to the evening amidst a holocaust of hysteria and chaos among the stagehands. (Reed 1972)

No doubt Horton Foote, who like most actors had seen a good store of hilarious moments onstage, appreciated the humour of this episode, even if his own reputation was marginally involved, and Reed, who was born in Ft. Worth, treated him quite gently in this review. "Horton Foote's libretto", writes Reed, "has a Southern feeling about it, although it seems spoken in comic-strip bubbles without much time for revelation" (1972). Perhaps Reed recalled the deliberation of speech in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Trip to Bountiful*, but he surely suggests that Foote has a dramaturgic power not realized here. In any case, this review may have given the playwright a sense that he had escaped well from Margaret Mitchell's imaginary world.

So, what was meant earlier by the suggestion that Foote's sense of the South was focused by his experience with this London show? The fact is that upon his return to the United States he soon faced the loss of both of his parents, his father in 1973 and his mother in the following year. As he coped with their respective declines and deaths, he took on, with some re-

luctance, another plantation project, the composition of a screenplay for a proposed film titled *Many Mansions*, which was to be based on the 1972 book *The Children of Pride*, a collection of plantation letters from the archives of a Georgia family during the ante-bellum period and succeeding years.⁴ After a considerable amount of labour with manuscripts and extensive drafts of this work, he was told that the project would not go forward.⁵ Upon the death of his mother, Foote went to the family home in Wharton, where he pondered over the old documents and letters his parents had left. At the age of nearly sixty, he resolved to write a series of plays based on his father's early life, his courtship, and his hard-earned acceptance as substantial member of the town's business community. Since the senior Foote had been rejected by his family in childhood and had been obliged by poverty to work in a store on a plantation fifteen miles south of Wharton, the playwright devoted *Convicts*, the second play of this cycle, to the boy's adventures on this place. While the nature of young Foote's circumstances there must remain unclear, his son's fictionalized account quite possibly draws upon information from his father's recollections. The plantation owner in Foote's play is clearly based on William Toliver 'Tol' Taylor (1838-1926), to whom Foote's mother, the former Harriet Gautier Brooks, was related by marriage, and the character, Soll Gautier, has even been given one of her family names. Horton Foote has given this character attributes which no doubt depart considerably from those of Tol Taylor, but perhaps the playwright felt that after some fifty years it was not necessary to be excessively sympathetic to the former planter.

On old Soll's plantation, things were much as they had been before the Civil War. Though slavery had been banned, landowners could still rent convicts from state prisons and work them as though emancipation had never happened. This imagined plantation is Foote's response to the romantic sentiment that drew such acclaim in Margaret Mitchell's novel and in Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh's dramatic film version of that novel. Soll Gautier is a colourful old rascal, of course, but he is also a murderer, an exploiter of the women on his place, and a great liar whose promises to those he encounters are worthless. He does not die easily, emerging at one point from his coffin after he has been deemed ready for burial, and when he finally does die, he retains a powerful grip upon the arm of the boy who is based on Horton Foote's father. It is a black man who helps the boy break

⁴ See Myers 1972.

⁵ According to Watson 2003: 114, Foote prepared for this adaptation by reading Charles Colcock Jones' *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (1842) and Eugene D. Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1961). It was the letters of the family of C.C. Jones that constituted the primary material of *The Children of Pride*.

that grip. Robert Duvall played Old Soll in the film version of this play *Convicts*, and perhaps he made the old man slightly too likable. In the play text, the old man is a figure from a nightmare.

Foote's play *Convicts*, then, can be seen as a destination for a writer shaped by the peculiar history of the South and its old social system. His connections are interesting in regard to his journey, with Harriet Beecher Stowe's family one remote relation (Harriet's mother was a Foote), Margaret Mitchell the author of a work on which one of his own works was based, and Harper Lee, who was a close friend, a third best-selling novelist and another whose fiction he laboured to re-shape into dramatic form. In his trip to London to imagine a show projecting an image Foote knew was not realistic, he must have developed in his own mind the possibility of a play that would tell the truth.

That play, *Convicts*, provides the historical foundation for Horton Foote's *magnum opus*, his nine-play *Orphans' Home Cycle*, one of the masterworks of twentieth-century drama. In this sequence of dramas, Foote engages the past of his region and his family, focusing upon his own father's early struggle to establish himself in a community which was itself emerging from conditions which were in some key respects primitive and makeshift. At the beginning of the first play of the *Cycle*, the year is 1902. The setting is Harrison, Texas, a fictionalized version of Foote's hometown of Wharton, which had been established in 1846, a decade after Sam Houston defeated Mexican general Santa Anna at San Jacinto, some seventy-nine miles to the east. Foote's father, Albert Horton Foote, Senior, had been born in 1890, and Horace Robedaux, the boy whose life constitutes the central thread of the *Cycle*, is based on him. The playwright's intimate familiarity with Wharton and its geographical surroundings was reinforced by his numerous familial connections there and by the nostalgic preoccupations which had made memories of the pre-Appomattox South a comfort to many of those he knew in his childhood.

But for Foote as artist, the view of the South was filtered by his experience in the larger world of the urban North, and the perspectives he developed after leaving Wharton in 1933 enabled for him a kind of objectivity that dissociated his experience from the attitudes and prejudices which still held sway in much of the South. Though Foote himself grew up in comfortable if not luxurious circumstances, his father had faced a very different life, one of abandonment and poverty, in a situation overshadowed by a family history once marked by wealth and power. Horton Senior had emerged from this struggle a kind and responsible man, a small-town merchant whose consideration for his black customers was not usual in a town whose politics were governed by a group calling itself 'The White Man's Union' (Castleberry 2014: 5).

As Horton Junior sought acting roles in Depression New York and meditated on the vagaries of a history that had interwoven slavery and racial discrimination with the daily lives of the ordinary people living in this Texas cotton town, and as he considered the vanished fortunes of his Horton and Foote ancestors, he seems to have realized that his own life's work lay in the direction of an investigation of this past and its consequences. His first play *Wharton Dance*, a short piece written as an exercise for the acting group he had joined in 1937, set forth a sequence of events occurring at a high school dance in his home town, and the magnetic attraction of his family's native region governed his dramatic inspiration in the nearly seven following decades of his life. Though he would take on many diverse professional assignments and write steadily about matters grounded back in Texas, it was after the deaths of his parents, Albert Horton Foote, Sr., and Hallie Brooks Foote, in the early 1970s that he found himself embarking upon a comprehensive dramatic project which would commemorate his father's history, a history which itself reflected the larger sequence of events that had shaped early Texas.

The region around Wharton had been an active environment in early Texas, from the days when Spanish rule prevailed and the Karankawa Indians, known as cannibals, dominated the coastal realm. As white adventurers moved in from the east, some motivated by the prospect of free or cheap land and others by a variety of reasons ranging from the idealistic to the desperate, this land of buffalo, bear, wolf, and storm saw much conflict, and those who survived there tended to develop a toughness and sometimes a volatility that could manifest itself in both good and bad ways. Entrepreneurs excited by the options open to them in such a place were inclined on the one hand to establish a protective order and on the other to resist oppressive authority of the kind thrown off further east in 1776. Those with dreams of great success in agriculture strove successfully to import the slave system that had enriched a part of society in the South, and few of the new Texans felt serious qualms about pushing the Indians aside, or under. Mexico, whose power remained a substantial obstacle to the hopes of many, required a major effort before it could be effectively neutralized, but that issue was resolved after Sam Houston's crushing victory at San Jacinto, and, as the Civil War approached, some of Horton Foote's ancestors were doing very well for themselves in Texas.

The role of Albert Clinton Horton kept in his great-great-grandson's mind two different kinds of admonitory ideas. One of these was much like that medieval idea illustrated by the image of the Wheel of Fortune and described in various moral treatises of the *de casibus* genre, works which serve to remind mortals that fortune is fickle and that worldly things pass away. 'Governor' Horton had seemed very fortunate, overcoming a youth-

ful gambling addiction and achieving political success in Alabama before moving to Texas, establishing a busy commercial presence in Matagorda, and just barely escaping the Goliad massacre. He then went on to assume a number of leadership roles in early Texas while acquiring plantation lands and the numerous slaves required to work them, all the while encouraging and supporting the establishment of churches and religion. Yet his wealth depended upon the institution of slavery, and, with emancipation and the end of the Civil War, his prosperity ended, and he died in the autumn of 1865, leaving a much-diminished inheritance which soon became the object of conflict and litigation.

The second admonitory idea is that of the deep flaw in human character that authorized the slave system and its inhumanity, a flaw that drew otherwise decent and responsible people into an unthinking acceptance of brutality, exploitation, and selfishness. A.C. Horton was reported to care very much for the souls of his slaves, but his fierce defiance of Northern Abolitionism was quite in accord with prevalent attitudes in his world. And, in the story of Louisa Picquet told by one of those Yankee Abolitionists, the theme of sexual exploitation of slaves, a theme largely ignored down South, makes it clear that plantation patronage often involved much more than providing Sunday school. Horton Foote knew well that many of the blacks of his home region were blood relatives of many of the whites as a direct result of relationships which, though officially forbidden, were in fact tolerated more than anyone liked to acknowledge.

Thus, in the play *Convicts*, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, Foote presents a plantation that has fundamentally retained the nature of the plantation of slavery days. Instead of owning slaves, Soll Gautier cheaply rents convicts from the state, convicts whose incarceration is determined by arbitrary decisions often entirely unrelated to the administration of justice. He disdains all compassion for the convicts and takes pride in seeing them worked hard regardless of health or condition. In the senile paranoia which characterizes his last days, Soll contends with old fears and desires, vaguely recalling the now-vanished black women he once had available on the plantation and facing moments of panic as he imagines convicts have escaped their chains and come to kill him.⁶ His fear of wild animals, while not entirely anachronistic, suggests the earlier world in which wolves and bears did pose a threat to the unwary, and his sudden inclination to befriend young Horace Robedaux, who not only promises to guard Soll's body from wild animals but also keeps that promise after Soll's

⁶ The author of this essay has suggested elsewhere that one of the convicts feared by Soll may have been his biological son (Haynes 2016: 157).

death, merely strengthens the false claim of the pioneer myth, a claim still largely honoured by uncritical posterity.

Soll's ignorance, brutality, and bad faith contrast vividly with the romantic elegance and grandeur shown in some other literary representations of the ante-bellum plantation, and his rough ferocity and sociopathy would not fit neatly into Scarlett O'Hara's pre-war world. Horace Robedaux, the young protagonist of *Convicts*, is the son of Corella Thornton Robedaux, the granddaughter of a major Texas planter. Foote bases Corella on his own grandmother, who was born Corella Horton, the granddaughter of Albert C. Horton, who had led cavalry against the Mexican army, helped locate the site of a new state capital (now Austin), served as lieutenant governor, and had become acting governor while the elected governor was off in Mexico. A dashing figure in the ante-bellum world, Horton owned extensive properties near Matagorda and near Wharton. In Foote's play, Horace Robedaux, an impoverished semi-orphan whose father has died and whose mother has abandoned him, lives on the Gautier plantation, sleeping in the plantation store near a black couple employed there who have befriended him.

In Horace's predicament, we see no nostalgia for the ante-bellum world or for Confederate glory. Instead, Horace depends upon his kind black friends for advice and hospitality, even though their own situation is as financially precarious as his own. The embodiment of the plantation past is Soll Gautier, a blustering liar and at times ferocious monomaniac, obsessed with the assertion of his power and hatred of his enemies. Clearly, Soll was never influenced by the literary tradition or by the courtesy and honour revered by some members of the Southern aristocracy. Instead, he is a rough, fierce slave-driving brute whose only charm lies in the half-senile weakness old age has finally imposed upon him. When he orders his workers in the middle of the night to build him a coffin and they do so, he lies down in the coffin to test it out, and falls asleep, making his men believe he is dead till suddenly he awakens and gives them a shock. Later, when he does die, he expires while clutching the arm of young Horace, who is the only other white person in the vicinity, and, even in death, his grip remains strong. This bizarre moment must be understood in a larger context, for Horace is in a sense the destitute heir of the lost plantations of his famous ancestor, a man who, like Soll Gautier, turned vast acreage of the unsettled Texas frontier into an agricultural enterprise based on exploitation of those required to provide labour. And like Horace's wealthy ancestor, Soll will leave his estate in a dissolving chaos.

Horton Foote's ancestor Albert C. Horton, though a far more reflective and civilized man than Soll Gautier, was, like nearly all of his Texas contemporaries (with the notable exception of Sam Houston) a fervent se-

cessionist. His plantations held a large number of slaves, and he was no doubt aware that the Northern enthusiasm for emancipation was a threat to his economic future, which consideration strengthened his resistance to such developments as the rise of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. As it turned out, Horton's fears were fully justified, and the victory of the North did mean the loss of his wealth. He died in Matagorda shortly after Appomattox, and his son Robert Horton, a Confederate veteran, lived out his life struggling for a modest income. 'Governor' Horton's wife Eliza managed to secure a pauper's pension and made some unsuccessful efforts to recover some resources from her husband's estate, but she went to live out her life near Goliad, the scene of one of her husband's great adventures, in the home of her son, who was for a time postmaster in that area. Judging from a surviving letter, Eliza remained cheerful in old age and enjoyed the simple life of rural Texas.⁷ An investigation suggests that she died in Weesatche, near Goliad, and is buried in a forgotten grave in a cemetery named Buzzards' Roost. Her husband at least has a distinguished if modest monument in Matagorda Cemetery which catches the fierce hurricane winds that blast that coast.

As Horton Foote went to work upon the cycle of plays written in response to his parents' deaths, he focused at first upon the figure of his father, who as a boy suffered from poverty and isolation in the small town in which his family had once held power and wealth. The first play shows the progressive abandonment of young Horace Robedaux by his family and his deceased father's friends, and the second play, *Convicts*, places Horace on a plantation like that owned by his great-grandfather, although it is also like that owned by Simon Legree, the chief villain of the very influential novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), written by Foote's distant kinswoman Harriet Beecher Stowe. And the Soll Gautier who runs the plantation in *Convicts* resembles Legree far more than he does Texas planter Albert C. Horton, who had devoted much of his energy to public service both in Alabama and in Texas, supporting churches and educational institutions before losing his wealth with the fall of the Confederacy. Soll, however, obsessed with the power he wields on his remote plantation, works his convicts even on Christmas Day and orders that no hymns be sung at his funeral.

Here it may be appropriate briefly to point out some similarities between Soll Gautier and Harriet Beecher Stowe's villainous planter Simon Legree, with a table suggesting evidence that Foote had at least peripherally in mind.

⁷ See Horton 1875.

<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe</i>	<i>Convicts, Foote</i>
Simon Legree. Master of plantation, a cruel, brutal man oblivious to humanity.	Soll Gautier. Master of plantation, a cruel, brutal man oblivious to humanity.
Slaves are worked seven days a week.	Convicts are worked every day.
Simon is a sexual predator.	Soll is a (former?) sexual predator.
Simon hates religion.	Soll hates religion (does not like hymns).
Simon kills slaves.	Soll kills convicts.
One black woman talks back to Simon.	One black woman talks back to Soll.
Simon dies in drunken dementia.	Soll dies in drunken dementia.
Young white man buries Uncle Tom. "There is no monument to mark the last resting-place of our friend. He needs none" (Stowe 1852: 408).	White boy seeks to memorialize dead convict. Later, he helps bury Soll, who gets no monument.
Simon hates hymns, requires slaves to entertain him with crude music.	Soll asks a convict to sing "Golden Slippers", but the man says he doesn't remember it.
Tom has had help to write home.	Convict Leroy Kendricks can't write, and his family can't read.

Foote thus seems to have reflected not only on his own family's plantation past as he took on the task of writing the *Orphans' Home Cycle*, but he also had in mind Harriet Beecher Stowe's vision of the plantation. And it is also likely that he drew upon another source, his friend Stark Young's plantation novel *So Red the Rose* (1934), a book which had a strong claim to being definitive in the moonlight and magnolias market until being suddenly torpedoed in that realm by Margaret Mitchell's 1936 book. Young, who died in 1963, was enjoying something of a revival in 1975 with the publication of John Pilkington's 1454-page *Stark Young: A Life in the Arts, Letters 1900-1962*, and Foote was no doubt glad to see his dear friend being celebrated, despite his own disinclination to revere the plantation past. And certainly Young's novel was creditable in its background research, as Pilkington points out in his Twayne volume in the section titled "*So Red the Rose, Authenticity*" (1975: 121-4). However, Foote's admiration for Young and his brilliant drama criticism did not extend to Young's unqualified sympathy for ante-bellum plantation life in the South.

Since Foote had worked hard to compose a script for the London *Gone with the Wind* musical show, with its set of songs sung by characters rang-

ing from Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara to Ashley Wilkes, his fiancée Melanie, and the slaves, Mammy and Prissy, he may have felt some satisfaction in including in *Convicts* songs which suggest a perspective which is perhaps more authentic. Crystal Brian observes, "In *Convicts*, probably the most poetic of Foote's cycle plays, music is linked with images of mankind in chains and various symbols of death" (1998: 102). She goes on to quote a lecture given by Foote at Texas A&M University:

In *Convicts*, I use the songs, "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos," "Rock Island Line" and "Golden Slippers." The first two are heard offstage, sung by the convicts as they work. "Golden Slippers" is sung by a convict, who can't really sing, at the burial of Soll, the owner of the plantation having forbidden any hymns to be sung at his funeral. The great folk singer, Leadbelly, told me many years ago that he sang "Rock Island Line" while he was working on a Texas prison farm.⁸ (Ibid.)

The contrast between the Gautier plantation of this play and the romanticized plantation of the musical *Gone with the Wind* draws strength from a realism that meets the preferences of common sense. One of the better headlines on a story dealing with the London show was "Tara! Tara! Tara!" which both knowingly mocks human susceptibility to moonlight and magnolia stuff and seems gently to endorse the moral of the Confederate horse's spectacular incontinence. In "Sailing after Lunch," Wallace Stevens has written:

The romantic should be here.
It should be there.
It ought to be everywhere.
But the romantic must never remain,
Mon Dieu, and must never again return.
(Wallace Stevens 1954: 120)

Facing a cosmetically reconstructed Southern past, Horton Foote, though he was no enemy of human dreams, regarded nostalgia for that past as a dangerous emotion in a world still seeking to recover from the consequences of slavery and the great war which had devastated the South. Recognizing some inevitability in the celebration of the more civilized aspects of plantation life, he also saw clearly that humans who have power over their fellow humans are all too likely to abuse that power, and thus he resisted glorification of the Confederacy and the mythology which arose around the ante-bellum way of plantation life.

Among the literary critics who have commented on *Convicts*, Laurin

⁸ A slightly different version of the text of Foote's A&M lecture is in Foote 2004: 115-36.

Porter, whose book on the *Orphans' Home Cycle* provides extensive commentary on all of the nine plays, has discussed the contrast between the Gautier plantation and the version of the Southern plantation imagined by those who sought nostalgically to represent ante-bellum life as highly civilized and sophisticated. She explains:

In the idealized version of the plantation myth, the land is lush and fertile, producing an abundance of crops, . . . The fertility of the land is reflected in the fertility of the family: a gracious and accomplished wife, beautiful daughters, and gallant sons. This harmonious picture is completed by a group of happy, well-cared-for slaves, regarded as an extension of the family. (Porter 2003: 196)

Turning to a discussion of the Gautier plantation, she continues: "The portrait presented in *Convicts* presents a sharp contrast to this ideal". She goes on to point out that "the lushness of the land has become a threat rather than a boon" (ibid.), and that Soll Gautier's reprehensible conduct and personal isolation set his world at odds with the romanticized myth of the plantation. Referring to Margaret Mitchell's novel and the famous film version of it, Porter calls *Gone with the Wind* "the quintessential popularization of the plantation myth" (157), but she makes no reference to Horton Foote's involvement with the London musical show or to his other extended engagement with plantation lore in his never-completed dramatization of Robert Manson Myers' award-winning book *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (extensive drafts of which are in the Horton Foote Collection at the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University). Interestingly, her analysis also disregards what would have been for Foote a critical feature of the plantation past, his great-great-grandfather's status as wealthy Texas planter and slave-owner.⁹ After all, Albert Clinton Horton's main plantation house Sycamore Grove was still standing in Wharton, Texas, in Foote's childhood and indeed up to the early 1960s. Another house which was once Horton's residence still stands as of 2019 in Matagorda, Texas.

The literary creation of plantations demonstrating the cruelty of slavery was of course nothing new, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had appeared in 1852, putting forth an emphatic alternative to favourable representations of contemporary large-scale Southern agricultural operations, but for Horton Foote, schooled in the New York theatre to greater objectivity in assessment of the history of his home region, the involvement of his own family in slavery and its consequences bore heavily upon his compulsion to write.

In his dramatic exploration of a Texas plantation like those on which his

⁹ She does briefly refer to A.C. Horton in Porter 2009: 25n3.

ancestors and other key figures of early Texas had held sway, Foote sought to stage his conflict of human purpose in a world divested of the sentimental simplicity that had drawn the enthusiasm of movie-goers and of that London audience that had paid to experience the musical show *Gone with the Wind*. He does seek a simplicity, that of childhood innocence and the decency of working people who have no escape from the cruelty of established power, but beyond the individual predicaments of these characters he invokes a larger historical vision extending from the semi-mythical days of early Texas through to the formation in a young man of a virtue that defies the hostile influence of environment and even tradition. And this virtue, in Foote's own creative mind, was the force that made his own art possible, for the Horace Robedaux who shared his tobacco and sympathy with the doomed convict, who sought to remember the names of the nameless victims of the Texas penal system, who preferred to sleep in the store near his black friends instead of in Soll Gautier's plantation house, whose main purpose in life was to earn enough money to buy a tombstone for his father, this young Horace is based on young Albert Horton Foote, the playwright's father, who, despite the severe demands of the Depression, provided funds for his son to go to acting school in California, thus enabling his son to begin a theatrical career of some seventy years and to set forth the human reality of the world he centres in his small town in Texas.

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