

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Bone by Bone

Peter Matthiessen

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About the Book

In this magnificent novel, which is the conclusion to the celebrated *Watson* trilogy, E.J. Watson tells his own story, through his turbulent life, to his death at the hands of vigilantes. From his destitute childhood in South Carolina, and the terrible events which haunt him for the rest of his days, the narrative shifts to the wilds of the Florida Everglades. Here, Watson establishes himself as a successful sugar-cane farmer, trying in vain to escape his past, and the uncontrollable, vicious side of his nature which is ultimately his downfall. Intelligent, a devoted husband and a lover, a stern father and a man capable of cruelty and cold-blooded murder, Watson is a character staggeringly real in his complexity. *Bone by Bone* confronts not only the racism, brutality and entrepreneurial greed of the American South at the turn of the century but also the paradox at the heart of human nature: our capacity for fierce love, compassion and unspeakable violence.

About the Author

Peter Matthiessen is a naturalist, explorer and writer. His works of fiction include *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *Far Tortuga* and the acclaimed “Watson Trilogy”. His explorations have resulted in many fine works of non-fiction, among them *The Snow Leopard*, *The Cloud Forest* and *The Tree where Man was Born*.

Also by Peter Matthiessen

Fiction

RACE ROCK
RADITZER
PARTISANS
AT PLAY IN THE FIELDS OF THE LORD
FAR TORTUGA
ON THE RIVER STYX AND OTHER STORIES
KILLING MISTER WATSON
LOST MAN'S RIVER

Non-Fiction

WILDLIFE IN AMERICA
THE CLOUD FOREST
UNDER THE MOUNTAIN WALL
THE SHOREBIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA
SAL SI PUEDES
THE WIND BIRDS
BLUE MERIDIAN
THE TREE WHERE MAN WAS BORN
(Also an illustrated edition with photographs by Eliot Porter)
THE SNOW LEOPARD
SAND RIVERS
IN THE SPIRIT OF CRAZY HORSE
INDIAN COUNTRY
NINE-HEADED DRAGON RIVER
MEN'S LIVES
AFRICAN SILENCES
EAST OF LO MONTHANG

To my old friends (and agents) Candida Donadio and Neil Olson and my new friend (and editor) Deb Putter (and Becky and Lee, and Beth and Benjamin, and many other friends at Random House) with sincere gratitude for their great patience and support in the long throes of what can only be called a twenty-year obsession

Bone by Bone

Peter Matthiessen

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

*There is a pain—so utter—it swallows substance up—
Then covers the Abyss with Trance so Memory can step Around—across—
upon it
As one within a Swoon—goes safely—where an open eye—Would drop
Him—Bone by Bone*

—Emily Dickinson

*Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up almost
inseparably.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

*A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory, and few eyes can see
[its] mystery.*

—John Keats

*Sir, what is it that constitutes character, popularity, and power in the
United States? Sir, it is property, and that only!*

—Governor John Hammond of
South Carolina

Author's Note and Acknowledgments

A man still known in his community as E. J. Watson has been reimagined from the few hard “facts”—census and marriage records, dates on gravestones, and the like. All the rest of the popular record is a mix of rumor, gossip, tale, and legend that has evolved over eight decades into myth.

This book reflects my own instincts and intuitions about Watson. It is fiction, and the great majority of the episodes and accounts are my own creation. The book is in no way “historical,” since almost nothing here is history. On the other hand, there is nothing that could *not* have happened—nothing inconsistent, that is, with the very little that is actually on record. It is my hope and strong belief that this reimagined life contains much more of the truth of Mr. Watson than the lurid and popularly accepted “facts” of the Watson legend.

—from the Author's Note for *Killing Mister Watson* (1990)

Bone by Bone is the third volume of a trilogy. Like *Killing Mister Watson* and *Lost Man's River*, it is a work of fiction. Certain historical names are used for the sake of continuity with the first two volumes, and certain situations and anecdotes were inspired in part by real-life incidents, but no character is intended to depict an actual person, and all episodes and dialogues between the characters are products of the author's imagination.

Once again, I am grateful for the kind assistance of the pioneer families of southwest Florida, who supplied much local information, both historical and anecdotal. None of these friends and informants are responsible for the

author's use of that material, or for his fictional renditions of the life and times of these families and others.

—Peter Matthiessen

E. J. WATSON

His ancestors:

John and William, sons of Lucius Watson of Virginia, moved to Edgefield District, South Carolina, in the middle of the eighteenth century. John's son Michael, who became a renowned Indian fighter and great hero of the Revolutionary War, married William's daughter Martha, his first cousin. Their only son was Elijah Julian (1775-1850), who consolidated the large family holdings and left a plantation at Clouds Creek to every one of his eleven children, including Sophia, Tillman, Artemas, Elijah Junior, Michael, Ann.

His paternal grandparents:

Artemas Watson (1800-1841) and Mary Lucretia (Daniel) Watson (1807-1838)

His parents:

Elijah Daniel Watson ("Ring-Eye Lige")

b. Clouds Creek, S.C., 1834

d. Columbia, S.C., 1895

Ellen Catherine (Addison) Watson

b. Edgefield Court House, S.C., 1832

d. Fort White, Fla., 1910

Edgar Artemas1 Watson

b. Clouds Creek, S.C., November 7, 1855

d. Chokoloskee, Fla., October 24, 1910

1st wife (1878): Ann Mary "Charlie" (Collins) Watson, 1862-1879

Rob Watson, b. Fort White, Fla., 1879-?

2nd wife (1884): Jane S. "Mandy" (Dyal) Watson, 1864-1901

Carrie Watson Langford, b. Fort White, Fla., 1885-?

Edward Elijah "Eddie" Watson, b. Fort White, Fla., 1887-?

Lucius Hampton Watson, b. Oklahoma Territory, 1889-?
3rd wife (1904): Catherine Edna "Kate" (Bethea) Watson, 1889-?

Ruth Ellen Watson,² b. Fort White, Fla., 1905-?

Addison Tilghman Watson,[†] b. Fort White, Fla., 1907-?

Amy May Watson,[†] b. Key West, Fla., 1910-?

Common-law wife: Henrietta "Netta" Daniels, ca. 1875-?

Minnie Daniels, ca. 1895-?

Common-law wife: Mary Josephine "Josie" Jenkins, ca. 1879-?

Pearl Watson, ca. 1900-?

Infant male, b. May 1910; perished in hurricane, October 1910

EJW's sister: Mary Lucretia "Minnie" Watson, b. Clouds Creek, S.C., 1857-?

Married William "Billy" Collins of Fort White, Fla., ca. 1880

Billy Collins died in 1907 at Fort White

The Collins children:

Julian Edgar, 1880-?

William Henry "Willie," 1886-?

Maria Antoinett "May," 1892-?

ALSO: EJW's Great-Aunt Tabitha (Wyches) Watson (1813-1905), 3rd wife and widow of Artemas Watson's brother Michael: instrumental in marriage of Elijah D. Watson and Ellen Addison.

Her daughter Laura (1830-1895), childhood friend of Ellen Addison.

Married William Myers ca. 1867

Married Samuel Tolen ca. 1890

¹ Apparently he changed his second initial to J in later life.

² Not real name.

Chapter 1

Oh Mercy, cries the Reader. What? Old Edgefield again? It must be Pandemonium itself, a very District of Devils!

—Parson Mason L. Weems

Edgefield Court House

EDGEFIELD COURT HOUSE, which gave its name to the settlement which grew from a small crossroads east of the Savannah River, is a white-windowed brick edifice upon a hill approached by highroads from the four directions, as if drawing the landscape all around to a point of harmony and concord. The building is faced with magisterial broad steps on which those in pursuit of justice may ascend from Court House Square to the brick terrace. White columns serve as portals to the second-story courtroom, and an arched sunrise window over the door fills that room with austere light, permitting the magistrate to freshen his perspective by gazing away over the village roofs to the open countryside and the far hills, blue upon blue.

Early in the War, a boy of six, I was borne lightly up those steps on the strong arm of my father. On the courthouse terrace, I gazed with joy at this tall man in Confederate uniform who stood with his hand shielding his eyes, enjoying the fine prospect of the Piedmont, bearing away toward the northwest and the Great Smoky Mountains. In those nearer distances lay the Ridge, where a clear spring appeared out of the earth to commence its peaceful slow descent through woodland and plantation to the Edisto River. This tributary was Clouds Creek, where I was born.

On that sunny day when we climbed to the terrace, my father, Elijah Daniel Watson, rode away to war and childhood ended. As a "Daughter of Edgefield," his wife Ellen, with me and my little sister, waved prettily from the courthouse steps as the First Edgefield Volunteers assembled on the square. Her handsome Lige, wheeling his big roan and flourishing a crimson pennant on his saber, pranced in formation in the company of cavalry formed and captained by his uncle Tillman Watson. Governor Andrew Pickens saluted the new company from the terrace, and so did Mama's cousin Selden Tilghman, the first volunteer from our Old Edgefield District and its first casualty. Called to the top step to inspire his townsmen, the young cavalry officer used one crutch to wave the blue flag of the Confederacy.

Hurrah, hurrah, for Southern rights, hurrah! Hurrah for the bonnie blue flag that flies the single star!

Governor Pickens roared, "May the brave boys of Edgefield defend to the death the honor and glory of our beloved South Carolina, the first great sovereign state of the Confederacy to secede from the Yankee Union!" And Cousin Selden, on some mad contrary impulse, dared answer the Governor's exhortation by crying out oddly in high tenor voice, "May the brave boys of Edgefield defend to their deaths our sovereign right to enslave the darker members of our human species."

The cheering faltered, then died swiftly to a low hard groan like an ill wind. Voices catcalled rudely in the autumn silence. Most citizens gave the wounded lieutenant the benefit of the doubt, concluding that he must have been dead drunk. He had fought bravely and endured a grievous wound, and he soon rode off to war again, half-mended.

Clouds Creek

When the War was nearly at an end, and many slaves were escaping to the North, a runaway was slain by Overseer

Claxton on my great-uncle's plantation at Clouds Creek.

Word had passed the day before that Dock and Joseph were missing. At the racketing echo of shots from the creek bottoms, I yelped in dismay and dropped my hoe and lit out across the furrows toward the wood edge, trailing the moaning of the hounds down into swamp shadows and along wet black mud margins, dragged at by thorns and scratched by tentacles of old and evil trees.

I saw Dock first—dull stubborn Dock, lashed to a tree—then the overseer whipping back his hounds, then two of my great-uncles, tall and rawboned on rawboned black horses. The overseer's pony shifted in the shadows. Behind the boots and milling legs, the heavy hoof stamp and horse shivers, bit jangle and creak of leather, lay a lumped thing in earth-colored homespun. I was panting so hard that my wet eyes could scarcely make out the broken shoes, the legs hard-twisted in the bloody pants, the queer gray thing stuck out askew from beneath the chest—how could that thing be the limber hand that had offered nuts or berries, caught my mistossed balls, set young “Mast’ Edguh” on his feet after a fall? All in a bunch, the fingers had contracted like the toes of a stunned bird, closing on nothing.

*

At daybreak Mr. Claxton, on the lookout, had seen a small smoke rising from a far corner of the swamp. His horse was saddled and he did not wait for help, just loosed his hounds and rode on down there. The runaways had fled his dogs, obliging him to shoot and wound them both—that was his story. He was marching them home when this damned Joseph sagged down like a croker sack, pissing his pants. “I told that other’n over yonder, Shut up your damn moanin. Told him, Stand that son-bitch on his feet, I ain’t got all day. Done my duty, Major, but it weren’t no use.”

Major Tillman Watson and Elijah Junior sat their horses, never once dismounted. My great-uncles chewed on Claxton's story. The dead boy's wet homespun was patched dark and stuck with dirt, and a faint piss stink mixed with dog smell and the sweet musk of horses. "Wet his damn pants," the overseer repeated to no one in particular, awaiting the judgment of those mounted men. He was a closed-face man, as hard as wire.

"You have no business here," Great-Uncle Elijah Junior told me, not because night was coming on or because I was too young to witness this grim sight but because I was certainly neglecting whichever chore I had abandoned without leave. To the overseer he never spoke, confining his exasperation to muttered asides in the direction of his older brother concerning "the waste of a perfectly good nigger."

Major Tillman Watson, home from war, seemed more disturbed by Claxton's viciousness. "Dammit, Z. P., you trying to tell us these boys was aiming to outrun them hounds of yours? How come you had to go and pull the trigger?" He was backing his big horse, reining its wild-eyed head away toward home. "Close his eyes, goddamnit." He was utterly fed up. "Go fetch a cart."

"I reckon he'll keep till mornin'," Claxton muttered, sullen.

Major Tillman frowned down on me, in somber temper. "What do you want here, boy?" (*Badly enough to run out here barefoot*, that's what he meant.) "It's almost dark," he called, half-turned in the saddle. "You're not afraid out here? All by yourself?"

"Yessir. I mean, nosir."

"*Nosir*." The Major grunted. "You're a Watson anyways, I'll say that much. All the same, you best go on home while there's still light, and don't go worrying your poor mama." The old soldier rode away through the dark trees.

"Tell them niggers bring the wagon if they want him!" the overseer bawled, not wishing to be heard. Receiving no answer, he swore foully. "Niggers'll come fetch him or they

won't—that sure ain't *my* job.” He did not bother to shut the black boy's eyes. “Too bad it weren't this monkey here,” he rasped, stripping the bonds from the wounded Dock, who yelped with each rough jerk of the hemp line.

Though Claxton had grumped in my direction, he had paid me no attention until this moment. “What in the name of hell you want? Ain't never seen a dead nigger before?” He climbed gracelessly onto his horse, cracked his hide whip like a mule skinner. “Nosir, I ain't goin to no damn court, cause I ain't broke no law. Just done my job.” The slave stumbled forward, with the man on horseback and lean hounds behind. In single file against the silver water of the swamp, they moved away into the dusk. “You aim to leave him here alone?” I called. *Out in the swamp all night? All by himself? With the owls and snakes and varmints?*—that's what I meant. It sounded absurd, and Claxton snorted, cursing his fate because he dared not curse a Watson, even a Watson as young and poor as me.

In the dusk, the forest gathered and drew close. Behind me, the body lay in wait. Alone with a woodland corpse at nightfall, I was scared. I peered at the earthen lump between my fingers, retreating from its great loneliness. In the dusk he seemed to withdraw, as if already rotting down amongst the roots and ferns, skin melding with the black humus of the swamp, as if over the night this bloodied earth must take him back—as if all of his race were doomed to be buried here in darkness, while white folks were laid in sunny meadows in the light of Heaven.

*

On long-gone sunny Sabbath mornings of those years before the War, before the restless and ungrateful Africans were banished from our churches, I would run with the black children into the bare-earth yards back in the quarters, scattering dusty pigs and scraggy roosters to make room for

hide-and-seek and tag and jump-rope games, or go crowding into Aunt Cindy's cramped dark cabin to be lifted and hugged and fed molasses biscuits, fat-back or clabber, hominy, sometimes wild greens. And in those slave cabins on a Sunday morning I was always looked after by this sweet-voiced Joseph, who went out of his way to make the white child welcome.

Now that shining face had thickened like a mask with its stopped blood, and bloodied humus crusted its smooth cheek. I stood transfixed by the glare in those brown eyes. The dead I had seen before, even as a child, but not the killed. Until Mama protested, our cousin Selden, home from war, had related philosophically that the corpse of a human being slain in violence and left broken where it fell looked nothing at all like the sedate family cadaver, eyes closed and pale hands folded in its bed or coffin, scrubbed and perfumed, combed and suited up in Sunday best for the great occasion. Only those, said he, who touched their lips to the cool forehead one last time knew that faint odor of cold meat left too long.

In violent death, Cousin Selden said, even one's beloved—and here he looked sardonically at Mama, whose husband he “cordially” disliked—looked like a strange thing hurled down out of Heaven. Cousin Selden was well-read and liked to talk in that peculiar manner. Not that black Joseph had been my “beloved,” I don't mean that. Joseph was guilty and the laws were strict, and had he lived, he would have been flogged half to death, as Dock would be. But Joseph had been kind to me, he had been kind. I was still young and could not help my unmanly feelings.

*

Damn you, Joseph—that yell impelled me forward, for in a moment I was kneeling by his side, trying to pull him straight, trying to fold his arms across his chest. The dead

are heavy, as I learned that day, and balky, too. He would not lay still the way I wanted him. The brown eyes, wide in the alarm of dying, were no longer moist with life but dry and dull. I was terrified of his company, I had to go.

The forehead was drained of blood and life, like the cool and heavy skin of a smooth toadstool. Drawing the eyelids down, my finger flinched, so startled was it by how delicate they were, and how naturally and easily they closed. Where the shock lay was not in the strange temperature but in the protruding firmness of the orb beneath, under thin petals—I had never imagined that human eyes were so hard. A moment later, one lid rose—only a little, very very slowly—in a kind of squint.

I don't recall how I reached my feet, that's how quick I jumped and ran. *Joseph! I'm sorry!* To the horseman, I hollered, *Wait!*

"Just goes to show you," the overseer was muttering as I caught up. "There is such a thing as too much nigger spirit." I did not ask what that might mean, and anyway, I doubted if he knew.

As for my fear, it was nothing more than common dread of swamps and labyrinths, of dusk, of death—the shadow places. Yet poor black Joseph sprawled unburied in the roots, losing all shape and semblance to the coming night, was an image etched in my mind's eye all my life.

*

My grandfather Artemas Watson had died in 1841 at the age of forty. His second wife, Lucretia Daniel, had predeceased him three years earlier, at age thirty, and my father—Elijah Daniel Watson—born in 1834, was therefore an orphan at an early age. However, the family held considerable wealth. Grandfather Artemas had owned sixty-nine slaves, with like numbers distributed among his brothers. Upon his death, his estate was mostly left to his eldest son, my uncle James,

who became my father's keeper. In 1850, at age fifteen, Papa still held real estate and property in the amount of \$15,000, by no means a negligible sum, but he seems to have squandered most of his inheritance by the time he married Mama five years later, mostly on gambling and horses.

The marriage of a Clouds Creek Watson was duly recorded in the Edgefield Marriage Records: *Elijah D. Watson and Ellen C. Addison, daughter of the late John A. Addison, January 25, 1855*. My maternal grandfather, Colonel Addison, had commissioned the construction of the courthouse from which the village took its name (and in which his unlucky daughter's husband, in the years to come, would make regular appearances as a defendant). His pretty Ellen was an orphan, her mother having died at age twenty-five, but she had been a ward in a rich household—she was given her own slave girl, and piano lessons—until the day she was married off to young Elijah. They had little in common other than the fact that their fathers had died in 1841, and both were orphans.

*

Four years after his bugled glory on the courthouse square, Private Lige Watson, having lost his horse, walked home from war. Papa told us of the sack and burning of Columbia by General Sherman, evoking the capital's lone chimneys, the black skeletons of its noble oaks. Astonished that Clouds Creek and Edgefield Court House had been left untouched, he said, "You folks at home know nothing of real war."

We had known something of real war, of course, having scoured bare sustenance from our poor remnant of the Artemas Plantation. The rest had been bought or otherwise acquired by Great-Uncle Elijah Junior, who early in the War had assumed our mortgage, extending modest help to the absent soldier's wife and children. As a precaution against

his nephew's famous temper, he let our family remain in the dilapidated house and raise such food and cotton as we might.

However, my mother, burdened with little Minnie, could not manage alone, not even with my eight-year-old hard labor, so my great-uncle sent over the sullen Dock, knowing Dock would run off at the first chance, which he did, this time for good. Next, he sent us old Tap Watson, who had grown up on the Artemas Plantation, since Tap was going to be lost to him in any case, the way the War was going. As the father of the slain boy Joseph, Tap no longer worked well under Overseer Claxton, who had been too quick on the trigger, all agreed. *That feller could never see eye to eye with niggers, just can't tolerate 'em*, sighed Great-Uncle Tillman, *but he scares some work out of 'em, I'll give him that*.

Tap Watson was a small blue-black man of taciturn and truculent disposition, but he had not forgotten the kindness received from his late Master Artemas, that vague and gentle farmer who had owned Tap's parents and from his deathbed had set this old man free. Unlike his boy, Tap preferred slavery to Freedom—*If Freedom never comes, we has our jobs, y'know, somethin to eat*—and when it came, he had cashed it in by selling himself to Elijah Junior for cold coin. Slave or freedman, Tap had never missed a day of work—such was his boast and pride—not even the day after Joseph died down in the swamp. Earlier, Tap had warned his boy that runaways deserved dire punishment, but hearing the news, Tap had stopped dead in his tracks and fixed his son's slayer with a baleful yellow eye, only turning away when the overseer hitched his whip by way of warning.

Ordered to leave that old man be, Claxton folded his arms and remained right where he was, to make sure Tap finished slopping the hogs before taking time off to hitch a mule to the wagon and go fetch the body. Never again would Tap acknowledge the overseer's presence. Even when the

shouting Claxton pointed at his eyes, those yellowed eyes out of Africa looked past him. For these reasons, Great-Uncle Elijah Junior was happy to be rid of that old man.

Besides Joseph, Tap had a second child, this one with Cinderella, Mama's slave girl, now the grown woman whom we called Aunt Cindy. Since all of the Watson plantations at Clouds Creek adjoined one another, these darkies had no need to change dwellings when Tap came back to us. Even so, Mama ordered them to marry.

*

When I told Papa how Mr. Claxton had killed Joseph, Papa said roughly, "Damn nigger runaway. Deserved no better." He was turning bitter, he was very restless. Returned from the War impoverished, now close to thirty, Papa had been obliged to start all over as a poor relation of stern prosperous kin who prided themselves on self-sufficiency and independence. A tenant farmer on the Artemas Plantation, he was paying a third of all crops raised to his uncle Elijah Junior. But in the lean aftermath of war, struggling to grow cotton with his wife and children, he slid into heavy debt to his own clan. As a war veteran, disarmed and disenfranchised, he would rail against the injustice of his fate, yet he would not tolerate Mama's criticisms of Elijah Junior. Indeed he acclaimed his uncle's "Watson thrift" even when this dour trait caused his own household to go hungry. (It was all very well about Watson thrift, his wife would say, but how did that differ from hard-hearted stinginess?) With a genuine and gallant optimism, my father pledged that one day, with God on his right hand and his strong son on his left, he would reclaim his family land, restoring the line of Artemas Watson to Clouds Creek. Carried away, he roughed my hair with vigor. Though my eyes watered, I wanted my soldier daddy to be proud of his son, and I did not whine.

For a time Lige Watson enjoyed oratorical support from his aunt Sophia, eldest daughter of the late patriarch, Elijah Senior, “the Old Squire,” whom she liked to refer to in her brothers’ presence as “the ramrod of this family.” Sophia Boatright was a big top-heavy woman with a baying voice, and her favorite topic—indeed, her *only* topic, Mama whispered—was the Watson clan, all the way back to the English Watsons (or Welsh or Scots or perhaps Ulstermen, sniffed Mama), those staunch landowners and men of means who had sailed in the sixteenth century to New York City, then traveled on to Olde Virginia to claim their tract of unfettered, free, and fertile land. The first New World patriarch was Lucius Watson Esquire of Amelia County in Virginia, whose sons would move on to South Carolina as early as 1735, when their first land grants were registered at Charleston—well before the arrival of these Edgefield Court House clans who gave themselves such airs today, Aunt Sophia assured us.

A son of those forefathers was Michael Watson, a famous Indian-fighter who chastised the Cherokees and later led a citizens’ militia against highwaymen and outlaws who had foully murdered his father and a brother. Meanwhile, he acquired a tract of six thousand acres on Clouds Creek, which was consolidated as clan property when he married Martha Watson, his first cousin. (Here Mama dared roll her eyes for her children’s benefit, screwing her forefinger into her temple to convey the lunacy caused by inbreeding, and sending our little Min into terrified giggles.)

During the Revolutionary War, Michael Watson had served as a field captain of Pickens’s Brigade, a mounted company armed with rifles and muskets for the mortal fight against the “King-Lovers” or Tories. At one point, he was captured and imprisoned at Columbia, where according to one reputable account—which Aunt Sophia enjoyed reading out loud to the clan—Martha Watson, who was “small and beautiful, with wonderfully thick long hair . . . wound a rope

around her body and carried files in her hair for the use of Captain Watson, [who] made his escape.” (Here my mother might pretend to yank and struggle desperately with her own hair, risking what she called “the Great Wrath of the Watsons” with her sly whisperings: *Captain Michael, darlin? Mah handsome he-ro? I have brought you this nice li'l ol' file so you can saw those bars in twain and make good your escape! So hold your horses, Captain dear, whilst I unsnarl this pesky thing from mah gloerious hay-uh!*)

In an early history of South Carolina, our famous ancestor had been described as “a determined and resentful man who consulted too much the counsels which these feelings suggested.” From Tory gaol, the choleric Captain had rushed straight back into battle, and was fatally wounded in the forest swamps on a branch of the south Edisto. Having turned over his command to Lieutenant Billy Butler, our ancestor composed himself and “died for Liberty.”

“Those Edgefield families prate about their ‘aristocracy’!” Sophia Boatright scoffed one day. “How about our Clouds Creek aristocracy? The first Watsons held royal grants for two decades before Andrew Pickens came down out of the hills, and they owned more land. It’s just that our land is farther from the Court House.”

(“Nevertheless,” Mama might murmur to my flustered father, who could not hush her forcefully in a family gathering, “it was called Pickens’s Brigade, not Watson’s Brigade, isn’t that true, dear? And that handsome young lieutenant became General Butler, father of General Matthew Calbraith Butler, who married the exquisite Maria Pickens, whose father was a general, too. Has there ever been a General *Watson*, dear?” Such remarks would be made just loud enough to stiffen the black whiskers of Aunt Sophia.)

Captain Michael’s only son, Elijah Julian, would become the landed patriarch of the Watson clan. Through industry and force of character, the Old Squire acquired eleven

plantations, one for each of his eleven children. However, "his favorite was always his first daughter, Sophia," declared Aunt Sophia. Among his seven sons, besides Tillman and Artemas and Elijah Junior, was another Michael, whose meddling widow, Great-Aunt Tabitha, was held responsible by both my parents for their unhappy marriage.

"I do de-clay-uh, I've been bred up on ouah family traditions," Aunt Sophia liked to say, with the shuffle and shift of bombazine and feathers that signaled the onset of another anecdote which celebrated her own insights and accomplishments. One day when the Yankees ordered their black militia to drill on her broad lawn, the Ramrod's gallant eldest daughter had strode forth shouting, "Now you monkeys just stop all that darn foolishness and go on home!" which of course they did.

We are no Eire-ish nor Sco-atch, nor are we Enga-lish— thus would the Old Squire tease his proud Sophia whenever she put on English airs, according to the recollections of her siblings. With Border folk, he would point out, who could determine who was what, since none had agreed for seven hundred years where the Borders lay? *No*, the Old Squire had mused, rapping his pipe. *We belong to none of those benighted races. We are sons of Watt, we are Border Watsons, nothing more and nothing else.* But when pressed, the Old Squire would concede that the clan was Welsh.

*

Mama's cousin Selden Tilghman, a young bachelor and scholar who lived alone on his family plantation, known as Deepwood, held the opinion that those early New World Watsons had probably turned up first in the port of Philadelphia, in the shiploads of Highland refugees from seven centuries of war and famine in the Border counties. These clannish and unruly Celts (as Cousin Selden delighted in portraying them) had horrified the Quakers with their

outlandish speech and uncouth disrespect for all authority. Their women were infamous for short-cropped skirts, bare legs, and loose bodices, while the men mixed unabashed poverty and filth with a raw arrogance and a furious pride which hastened to avenge the smallest offense, denigration, or injustice. Worse, they did this in the name of “honor,” a virtue which more mannerly colonials would never concede to such rough persons. They were urged westward toward the back country of the Pennsylvania Colony, in the hope that wild peoples as barbaric as themselves might do away with them.

The Borderers were a suspicious breed of feuders and avengers, cold-eyed and mistrustful of all strangers, or any who interfered with them in the smallest way. They fought their way through Indian territory with fatalistic indifference to hard faring and danger, spreading south like a contagion along the Appalachians into western Virginia and the Carolina uplands. Many were drovers of cattle and hogs, throwing up low cabins of wood or stones packed tight with earth, hunting and gathering the abounding game and fish, trading meat where possible for grain and iron, boozing and bragging and breeding, ever breeding. Scattering homesteads and ragged settlements south and west to the Great Smokies, massacring Cherokees wherever fortune smiled, they strengthened and perpetuated their headstrong clans without relinquishing one dour trait or archaic custom. When times were hard, not a few would resort to traditional Border occupations—reivers and cattle rustlers, highwaymen and common bushwhackers.

Or so, at least, Celtic life was represented by Cousin Selden, whose mother had come from the Cavalier gentry of Maryland, and whose amused, ironic views, spiced up by Mama, she passed on to her children in their father’s presence. The Border Watsons were essentially of this same breed, Selden implied—quarrelsome fighters disrespectful of all authority, obstreperous rebels against Church and Crown,

and as careless of good manners as of hardship and rude weather, not to speak of all the finer sentiments of the human heart.

Papa detested Cousin Selden's casual disparagement of the Clouds Creek Watsons. Though no match for his tart Ellen, he defended his family with a heartfelt rage. If the Watsons were mere Border rabble, he might bellow, then how would "precious Selden" explain their early prosperity in the New World? For whether by grant from the South Carolina Colony or Crown patent from King George, enlarged by land purchase, the first Carolina Watsons had acquired sixteen square miles—*sixteen square miles!*—of the best land in the Clouds Creek country on the north fork of the Edisto River even before that mud crossroads—not known until a century later as Edgefield Court House—would arise. What was more, my grandmother Mary Lucretia Daniel had been a descendant of Martha Jefferson, President Jefferson's great-aunt. "You have a long proud heritage to uphold," Papa exclaimed with passion, tossing his head dismissively in his wife's direction.

For his violent abuse and abysmal failure as a father and provider—for her own exhaustion and privation—the former Miss Ellen Catherine Addison repaid her husband with sly laughter at those "darned old Watsons," as she called them. The Addison family, she would imply, was better educated, more refined, and in every way more suitable than the Watsons to consort with the aristocracy at Edgefield Court House, not to speak of Charleston, far less England.

Lige Watson, in turn, would refer to his wife's "traitorous" Tory antecedents and their "lily-livered longing," as he called it, to be accepted by the Pickenses and Butlers, the Brookses and the Hammondses. "Spare your poor children these vulgarities, I beseech you," his wife might protest, to hone her point that he was not a gentleman. Ellen Catherine Addison, she would remind us, had been born into aristocratic circumstances, however straitened and reduced.

It was scarcely her fault that her feckless husband had sold off all of her inheritance excepting her mother's set of the Waverley novels, which was missing her own favorite, *Ivanhoe*. "To think," she would sigh, cocking her pretty head, "that I once thought of Elijah Watson as my *Ivanhoe*!" Gladly would she play the piano for her husband—"to soothe your savage breast, dear," she might add with a girlish peal—if such an instrument were to be found in a Watson house, or fit into a Watson house, for that matter, since for all their prosperity those Clouds Creek farmers, foregoing the large white-columned mansions of the Edgefield gentry, were mainly content with large two-story versions of the rough-sawed timber cabins of their yeomen forebears.

"Yeomen?"

Thus would my mother prattle for our benefit. We scarcely heard her, so intent were our wide eyes on the enraged and dangerous father in the chimney corner.

*

Increasingly, Papa would jeer at the emancipated Negroes, who could find no work around the towns and villages. In this past year of 1867, under the Reconstruction Act, all blacks had become wards of the Union government, to be protected henceforth as citizens and voters, and a Yankee detachment had been sent to Edgefield to enforce their rights. In a district where blacks outnumbered whites, and where white soldiers had been disenfranchised, the terrible hatred of Reconstruction would find its scapegoat in black freedmen, especially those "woods niggers" or "road walkers" who wandered the mud roads between settlements, awaiting fulfillment of the Union's promise of "forty Confederate acres and a mule." These ragged hordes were perceived by the ex-soldiers as a menace to white

womanhood and were commonly terrorized and beaten, sometimes worse.

Colonel Selden Tilghman, waving a copy of a Freedmen's Bureau report that murdered blacks were being found along the road or in the woods or swamps, had spoken publicly in favor of federal relocation of all freedmen from our Edgefield District, though he knew well that our local planters were counting on near-slave labor to survive. The crowd heard him out only because he had been a war hero with battlefield promotions, but finally the more bellicose began to shout that Tilghman was a traitor, war hero or no. Wasn't it true that he had freed his slaves before the War in defiance of Carolina laws against manumission, and openly endorsed Damn Yankee Abolition? Wasn't he the officer who had interfered with the execution of black Union soldiers imprisoned at Fort Pillow before General Nathan Bedford Forrest rode up and commanded the killing to resume? ("Blood and Honor, sir! In Virginia they take no nigger prisoners, and nor shall we!")

Tilghman's proposal never reached a vote, and Tilghman, never to be forgiven, was "hated out" of the community, in that hoary Celtic custom of assailing the outcast with hisses, blows, abuse, or stony silence. Next came the theft and slaughter of his stock, the burning barn, the threat of death, until at last the poor man fled the region or destroyed himself, "all because he had spoken out for Christian decency," said Mama, very upset that, for her children's safety, she dared not speak herself.

Cousin Selden had the courage of his isolation. Refusing to abandon the old family manse, he remained at Deepwood as a recluse even after the Regulators passed word that no one, white or black, should be seen going there or entering its lane. Within a few years, its roads and fields were sadly overgrown and the house had withdrawn and shrunk down like a dying creature behind the climbing shrouds of vine and creeper.

Deepwood

Lige Watson rode with a rifle in a saddle scabbard, a revolver in his belt, a hidden Bowie knife. Mostly, said he, the Regulators made their patrols on Saturday nights of the full moon—Major Will Coulter, Z. P. Claxton, Lige Watson, and two younger men, Toney and Lott, were the regulars. Other men would join when needed, and an indifferent nigger on a mule to tend the horses.

On what I thought must surely be the happiest day in all my life, Papa swung me up behind him on his big horse. “Come along and you will see something,” he promised, grinning. From time to time, he would teach me those arts which Mama disapproved of—how to manage and race horses, how to shoot and use a knife. Sometimes he let me taste his whiskey, and when he was drinking, he might show me “just for fun” how to cheat a bit at cards or conceal weapons. But as I would learn, he was barely competent in most of these attainments, which he confused with some ideal of manhood. I did, too, of course, for I was twelve.

We rode toward Edgefield. At the Tilghman place, called Deepwood, a slight fair man came out onto the highroad in his linen shirtsleeves, stretching his arms wide to bar our progress as the big horse danced and whinnied, backing around in its own dust.

“Not one word, boy,” Papa growled over his shoulder.

Cousin Selden murmured to the roan, slipping his hand onto the bridle so that Papa could not wheel into him, knock him away. The easy movement was so sure of horse and rider that the muscles stiffened in my father’s back. “Let go,” he grunted, shifting his quirt to his right hand as if set to strike our kinsman in the face.

With his fair hair and shy expression, Cousin Selden looked and sounded less like a bold cavalry officer and Edgefield hero than like my sister’s young piano teacher