

THE DAY THE CENTURY ENDED:
FRANCIS IRBY GWALTNEY'S
"SEQUEL" TO
THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

J E R O M E L O V I N G

SOMETIME IN 1961, AT THE ELEGANT DRISKILL HOTEL in downtown Austin, Texas, Jean Covert interviewed Norman Mailer for a local TV station. Mailer was relatively high on the list of American celebrities, having just published his perceptive and witty "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" at the outset of the ill-fated presidency of John F. Kennedy and the era of Camelot. (The fact that Mailer had stabbed his second wife the previous year in a late-night argument fueled by alcohol never came up in the interview.) When Covert commented on the phenomenon of early fame, Mailer, whose literary reputation had yet to pick up entirely from his first best seller at age 25, wondered whether it wasn't better to "make it" around 40. "Have you ever heard of Francis Irby Gwaltney?" he went on to ask his interviewer. "Gwaltney and I were buddies in the Philippines. We went into different companies so we didn't see exactly the same combat. But he wrote a book about the war there called *The Day the Century Ended*. It's interesting to compare the perspectives of the two books" (*Conversations* 72).

Gwaltney was actually in his mid-thirties when he published *The Day the Century Ended* in 1955. He met Mailer in 1944 in Texas when both were assigned to the army's 112th Regimental Combat Team that eventually saw combat in the Philippines. If the plots of Gwaltney's wartime novel and *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) are any reliable indication, Gwaltney saw a great deal more combat than Norman Mailer, who saw relatively little action from

what we know from other sources. Both novels go against the grain of the endearing reputation of World War II as the “good war,” not only in their stark descriptions of brutality against individual Japanese soldiers (whose dead mouths are regularly mined for gold) but also in the frank way each writer depicts the average “G.I. Joe” as neither blindly patriotic nor clean-cut. Both sets of soldiers throw around the “F” word, although the censor was probably at work in both cases—Mailer’s grunts having to say “fug,” whereas Gwaltney’s were allowed to say “fuck” but it had to be spelled on the page without the “c” (“fuk”).¹ Like *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Day the Century Ended* was made into a movie. Called *Between Heaven and Hell*, the 1956 movie starred Robert Wagner, Buddy Ebsen, and Broderick Crawford.

The Day the Century Ended was Gwaltney’s second book. His first, *The Yeller-Headed Summer*, was published in 1953. He wrote it with the help of Mailer, who kept in contact with Gwaltney almost until the latter’s death in 1981. In fact, it was during one of Mailer’s visits to Gwaltney in Arkansas that he met his sixth and final wife, Barbara Norris. In all, Gwaltney published eleven books, but clearly his finest was *The Day the Century Ended*. He also wrote television screenplays for “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” “The Fugitive” and possibly “The Waltons.”

When he first met Mailer, Gwaltney hadn’t even graduated from high school, having been in the army since 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They met, as noted, in Texas, the home base of the 112th. The fact that they were both were alien to the Lone Star state may have initially shown them common ground—Mailer being a “Yankee,” and Francis or “Fig,” hailing from Arkansas, where the Razorbacks have a genetic dislike for Texans. The Harvard graduate and the high school dropout, as J. Michael Lennon recounts in his biography of Mailer, also had mutual “literary interests and the night they met the two sat up all night . . . talking about the novels of Thomas Wolfe.” Mailer admired Gwaltney’s nasal drawl, Lennon reports, and soon he was able to imitate it—so well that Mailer became the basis for the Yankee character in *The Day the Century Ended*, but more on that later (75). Likewise, Gwaltney became the Southerner Wilson in *The Naked and the Dead*. Interestingly, both characters are killed in their respective stories.

Gwaltney’s wartime novel is a “sequel” to Mailer’s first in the sense that its publication followed *The Naked and the Dead*. Secondly, it deals with the same Asian theatre of war involving the same regimental company in spite of the fact that the future authors were sent on separate missions once they

reached the Philippines. Third, it revisits Mailer as a soldier, who according to Gwaltney was “a brave soldier, but not a good one” because of his near-sightedness (Brower 109). *The Day the Century Ended* bases the character of Meleski, a lingerie salesman in civilian life, on Mailer. He is described as “a natural mimic [who] was soon capable of talking to us in a language that only a sharp ear could differentiate from the good, Southern English” (116). Both novels are outstanding but *The Day the Century Ended* is more readable but less sweeping in its scope. It focuses on a close-knit community in a small Arkansas town whose state militia at the beginning of the war was federalized, sending off to war not only the protagonist but also his former schoolmates, farmworkers, and his father-in-law, the benign Colonel Cozzens, a cotton planter who “had joined the National Guard in his youth because it was what was expected of him” (83). All the soldiers from the small town of Gray’s Landing, founded by the narrator’s great-great-great-grandfather are in fact clean-cut, red-blooded Americans until they enter the caldron of combat. The protagonist Sam Gifford’s sweetheart is the prettiest girl in town, and their scenes of love before the war are idyllic and blissful. *The Naked and the Dead* more consciously captures the epic proportions of wartime America, seen socio-economically with its Dos Passos-inspired “Time Machine” profiles of the major characters. Thematically, it also anticipates Mailer’s fears, common after the end of World War II, that capitalistic/fascistic America would crush the lifeblood out of the little guy in the wake of the failure of world communism—the theme of *Barbary Shore*, Mailer’s second novel, in 1951. *The Day the Century Ended*, on the other hand, is a more traditional critique of war, played out on a more personal level.

The Naked and the Dead is set on the imaginary “hump-shaped” island of “Anopopei,” whereas *The Day the Century Ended* takes place on Luzon, where the 112th was stationed. The search for “Japs” involves the loss of life; in fact, Meleski is killed by friendly fire, after which Gifford attacks the officer who has stupidly opened fire on his own men. Gifford is court-martialed and given the choice of either a life sentence back at Leavenworth or assignment to George Company, where the only medals to be won are Purple Hearts and where the commanding officer is a fool and a sadist. Colonel Cozzens is also killed. During the grieving for the colonel, Gifford realizes that his father-in-law was too much of a Southern gentleman to have engaged in the vicious combat that characterized the close-in fighting between Americans and Japanese soldiers. Gifford “wondered now, were it possible for Colonel

Cozzens to be alive, if he would have commanded the quality of unwavering respect today that was so easily his during those violent, innocent days of the first island campaign.” He wonders whether he would have commanded the same fearful respect as his successor—and doubts it: “For all those young men [from Gray’s Landing] who had come to this war with an attitude akin to the romanticism of the Victorian soldier, there was nothing upon which they could hang the symbols of their accomplishments. Their officers were no longer the rich planters like Colonel Cozzens.” Through his realization, Gifford emerges from the “final curtain” of his Southern isolation “to become a man of the twentieth century, whether I liked it or not” (275). He comes to the “end of the century,” the nineteenth century that is, and the nostalgia-induced memories of the Civil War.

In a way, Gwaltney’s novel also partakes of William Faulkner’s South in which the descendants of the defeated Confederacy have been turned into a human cash registers. The past is not passed in *The Day the Century Ended*, but it is also no longer viable in the present. When Colonel Cozzens’ successor, a graduate from West Point with no real combat experience takes over, the general who is his immediate superior, lectures him after an operation in which men were needlessly lost: “My god, Colonel, does it make any *difference* what Grant did to Lee at Fredericksburg?” (183). Apparently, none of the book’s editors seemed to notice that this Southerner, unlike most of his male generation, did not have a firm grasp of his Civil War history, for the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862 was a Confederate victory, and Grant, not yet commander of all Union forces, was still making his military reputation in the West. Yet the idea of the South still living in the past nevertheless reverberates throughout *The Day the Century Ended*. Otherwise, its theme is simply the brutality of war, not only between enemies but also between allies, or soldiers living in close quarters with each other for too long. Both novels also dramatize the stark absurdity of death by combat. In *The Naked and the Dead*, a soldier is killed after shitting his pants and pulling down his trousers to let the stool fall out. In *The Day the Century Ended*, the dead man is “seated comfortably in his half-dug foxhole and on his face a silly grin, the kind he would have given a teacher had she caught him red-handed in some devilments or another” (132). Gwaltney’s story is told from an exclusively enlisted man’s point of view. When one grunt tells another that his brother-in-law is a major, the other responds, “Only a major, huh?” When told that the major has been in service almost four years, the other replies:

“Hmmm . . . Must be a fukup Friend of mine had a pet monkey in New Guinea that made major after only two years. He’d made lieutenant colonel, but he was only sixteen years old” (249). Mailer’s first wife, Beatrice Silverman, incidentally, was a commissioned officer in the Navy WAVES, while Mailer served his time in the army as an enlisted man.

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In the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, a small correspondence between Mailer and Francis Gwantley exists between November 17, 1947 and January 7, 1976. It shows the continuation and growth of a friendship forged in war, one that increases in warmth throughout, except for two interruptions. In the first, Fig objects to Mailer’s harsh criticism of an unnamed novel that followed the publication of *The End of the Century* in 1955. In the second, it was the fact of Mailer’s last wife that soured their friendship. At the outset of their postwar correspondence, Fig was all ears for both Mailer’s criticism and support in finding a literary agent for his work, all the while claiming inferiority because of his Southern roots. After finishing reading the highly successful publication of *The Naked and the Dead* on a “Sunday afternoon in 1948,” Fig concluded that his friend’s success made him “want to do something like that. But I’m not wise; I’m just a fucking little Southern boy who wants to write good books as Mark Twain did, and not necessarily be a brain. But now I wish I were wise too. . . .”

He would eventually find that success with *The End of a Century*, which was originally conceived as a short story in 1948. As Fig and his wife Ecey moved around Arkansas and neighboring Louisiana, where Fig earned ultimately a PhD and Ecey an MA in English from the University of Arkansas, they traded letters with Norman, announcing the births of a daughter and a son, as Mailer announced not only the births of his children but the acquisitions of the latest of what would ultimately become six wives, the last rather ironically hailing from Fig’s home state of Arkansas. Their daughter Mary Lee was born around the same time as Mailer and Beatrice’s Susan—in either the late 1940s or the early 1950s.

By September 26, 1949, Fig told Norman that he had finished a novel called *Caves of Ice*. It may have been his second try after writing *Road to the Bottom*, both of which were rejected by publishers as being “far too imitative of Mailer to stand on their own” (Gwaltney, 11 Mar.). Fig’s day job was

teaching high school juniors and seniors English in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He finished a third book entitled *Cordial Wine*, which was also declined for being part Southern novel and part fantasy. And perhaps like *Caves of Ice*, Fig, according to Mailer, “put too much in about the Southerners and your hatred of Southern life . . .” (Mailer, 5 Feb.). When *Barbary Shore* came out to mostly negative or lukewarm reviews, Fig found it “on the whole” a “frightening novel.” “The same reviewers,” he told his friend and literary mentor, who called *The Naked and the Dead* a descendant of *USA* would call this one a descendant of something by Kafka.

Gwaltney finally published his first novel, *The Yeller-Headed Summer*, in 1953. It could have been a revision of any of the other unsuccessful novels, and it may have received a good deal of input by Mailer. Over the years, the two writers visited each other in Arkansas and New York, and the Gwaltneys got on well with the succession of Mailer’s wives. Fig, however, did warn his friend that Adele, Number 2, was all woman and that he would “have to treat her entirely different from the way he treated (Number 1) Bea.” “That wasn’t all bad,” he added somewhat chauvinistically, as “a woman should be a woman and all woman, and anything else should be strictly a sideline” (Gwaltney, 14 Apr.). In other words, Fig recognized that Bea as Norman’s wife had tended to compete with him, rather than to serve as his “better” half.

By 1952, Fig had finished his course work for the PhD at the University of Arkansas and was teaching full time at Arkansas Tech in Russellville while he finished his dissertation, probably in creative writing. Mailer thought that *Yaller-Headed Summer* was Fig’s best book until he published *The End of the Century* in 1955. Gwaltney spent the next year in Hollywood advising the production of its movie version and writing for other entities. “What a place!” he wrote Mailer on January 6, 1955. Buddy Adler, who had produced the movie version of James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity* in 1953, was doing *The End of the Century* and paying Fig \$500 a week to advise on it. Besides that, the book itself, a Book-of-the-Month alternate, had already made this schoolteacher-turned-novelist relatively rich. He told Mailer on February 25 that he had made more money that year than in all the other years of his life put together. Yet by April 1963 he declared himself “broke,” trying to finish another novel entitled *The Quicksand Years*.

Before that, he had struggled in 1957 with a novel called *Moment of Warmth*, which Mailer critiqued for him as he had in the past. This time,

however, Fig found Norman's advice offensive and degrading. "If you're going to be a major novelist [Mailer told the successful author of *The End of the Century*] . . . you've got to realize that you aren't just going to grow into it." He told him to get off his "psychic ass" and start "invigorating his imagination." Needless to say, Fig resented the remark "keenly."

"It's about time," he responded, "you realize . . . I am not a student and am specifically not your student. I don't like your kind of writing and I do not intend to learn to like it." But the former protégé was just getting warmed up: "You seem to think that anything you say—no matter how insulting and crassly adolescent it is—must be taken for an utterance of God." Alluding to Mailer's Godlike manner during his last visit to Arkansas, he insisted: "I am a writer in my own right and I would have been one without you, although I have publicly given you credit for what you have done for me. So let's just stop this coming-of-Christ routine. . . . You asked me for an honest reply. You have it, right in your goddam teeth. You pushed hard enough. Now you owe me an apology" (Gwaltney, 25 June).

Mailer's apology was apparently not immediately forthcoming, and when it did arrive two years later, after Fig had written Mailer favorably about *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), it was cautiously affectionate. "After reading your letter," he told Fig in a letter dated October 28, 1959, "I was tempted to send you a postcard which would say: I still like you a bit boy, but I don't know that I'm proud of you. . . . Anyway, not that I like to admit it, but I was glad to hear from you. I don't suppose we're going to be friends again for a long time but we can at least be speaking acquaintances." Part of the problem to a full resumption of their friendship may have been the mercurial Adele, who apparently did not like Fig's wife, Ecey. Mailer, of course, was only one year away from the "trouble" in his life—his stabbing of Adele in 1960. By 1962, after Fig sent Mailer a locally published review of poems in *Death for the Ladies*, their friendship regained its full balance.

It would be nice to conclude this essay by saying that Francis Irby Gwaltney, until his death in 1981 at the age of fifty-nine, remained friends with Norman Mailer. Unfortunately, the two old friends quarreled again in 1979, following the publication of Fig's review of *The Executioner's Song* in the *Arkansas Gazette*. It was over a slighting remark Gwaltney made in the review about Barbara Norris, Mailer's sixth wife, whom he had met in 1975 at a party in Russellville, Arkansas, where the Gwaltneys were teaching

English at Arkansas Tech. Fig, whose monogamous idea of marriage was diametrically opposed to his friend's, evidently regretted the fact that he had allowed Barbara to attend his party in order to meet Mailer, with whom she subsequently left Arkansas to live and ultimately marry Mailer. Norris Church, as she came to be known after her marriage, resented Fig's reference to her as Mailer's "present live-in wife," as well as the fact that she was never mentioned by name in the article. When Mailer himself addressed the issue with Fig, he replied with the feistiness he had shown during their first quarrel. In response to Mailer's letter of November 27, 1979, he wrote a month later: "It has never been my understanding that acting as Barbara Norris's publicity agent was a condition of our friendship." He concluded that now that their friendship had been "lastingly breached," the thing he most deeply regretted was having allowed her to crash his party in 1975. Shortly before her official marriage to Mailer in 1980, Norris Church made an effort to patch up the quarrel, saying "Norman and I are getting married now, and it's all your doing, et cetera," but apparently Fig either never received the letter or simply ignored it, not even mentioning it to his wife (Manso 618–619).

In one of his last letters (extant in the HRC), however, Fig read *The Fight* (1975), a book that led Mailer almost directly to his magnum opus in *The Executioner's Song*, and told his wartime buddy and lifelong friend: "You'll discover, deep in your dotage, that people will be studying [*The Fight*] as a social document" (Gwaltney, 3 Aug.). Francis Irby Gwaltney was Norman Mailer's best and oldest friend, and the *New Yorker* who could do a pretty good Southern accent paid tribute to him in 1983, when he gave the keynote lecture at the Annual Creative Writing Workshop at Arkansas Tech that Fig had co-founded. Mailer had come for \$3,000, half his usual lecturer's fee, and at the close of the workshop he returned the check to establish a scholarship fund for creative writing at the college in Fig's name (Dempsey 42–45).² Today, advertised as the only Bachelor of Fine Arts, or BA level creative writing program in the Southwest, the BFA website still features a photograph of Gwaltney, the writer who hated the South enough to write in the Southern tradition of Mark Twain and William Faulkner. Along the way, he befriended another great writer, a *New Yorker* and a "Southerner"—that is, a "natural mimic" who could talk "to us in a language that only a sharp ear could differentiate from the good, Southern English."

NOTES

1. Mailer, interestingly enough, may have self-censored. He later told Edward de Grazia that “fug” was used for “fuck” because in the 1940s “you just couldn’t get near it”; see J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 793n.
2. Mailer returned to Arkansas Tech twelve years later, again donating his speaker’s fee to the college (“Scholarship”).

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