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Men

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# The Shadow of Huey P. Long behind Willie Stark:

## A Note to Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*

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Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) contains, as its first-person narrator Jack Burden suggests, the story of Willie Stark within the bigger story of Jack Burden himself (157, 355). Born as a son of an impoverished farmer in an unnamed Southern state, Willie Stark became the governor of the state and, after gaining dictatorial power, was assassinated by a doctor. It is a well-known fact that Robert Penn Warren, in describing Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*, had in mind Huey P. Long as a model. Long himself was born as a farmer's son in Louisiana and served as the governor of Louisiana. After he became a U.S. Senator, he continued to strengthen his political control over Louisiana. He was eventually assassinated, at the height of his dictatorial power, by Carl Austin Weiss, a medical doctor. In this note to *All the King's Men*, I will attempt to sort out various correspondences between the life of Huey P. Long and that of Willie Stark. Ladell Payne's essay, "Willie Stark and Huey Long: Atmosphere, Myth or Suggestion?" contains, to the best of my knowledge, the most detailed account of the similarities and differences between the career of Huey P. Long and that of Willie Stark. In this note, I will attempt to supplement the essay. I will also discuss some of Payne's observations.

## i

Huey P. Long was governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932. The state of which Willie Stark was governor from 1930 until his untimely death in 1937 is not named in the novel, but it is obviously Louisiana. First of all, it is "a Southern state" (219), bordering on "the Gulf of Mexico" (39). The capital of this Southern state, which is also unnamed throughout the novel, is located fairly close to the Gulf of Mexico, just as Raton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana is. In fact, one might sometimes feel "a breeze off the Gulf" (193) in the evenings in the capital city.<sup>1</sup> This state capital is situated on an unnamed river (242-44, 265), just as Baton Rouge is situated on the Mississippi. The reference to the summer excursion boats on the river, "side-wheeler[s]" (244), also suggests that the unnamed river is meant to be the Mississippi and that the unnamed state capital is to be construed as Baton Rouge. Some of the topographical features described in the novel, "bayou[s], lagoon[s], creek[s . . .] backwater[s]" (243), and "swamps" (243) beyond the suburbs of the capital city, also accord with those found beyond the suburbs of Baton Rouge. As Payne states, in the unnamed Southern state of the novel, there is "[a] sharp break between the flat rich country of the lower cotton delta and the low red hills of the poor upper-state region [. . .]" (582). A similar break was observable in Louisiana during the years when the story of Willie Stark evolves in the novel. All in all, these geographical correspondences clearly indicate that Warren modeled the unnamed state on Louisiana. Payne also points to "the importance of oil in the [unnamed] state" (583) to reinforce his argument that the state is obviously modeled after Louisiana.

Huey P. Long tells us in *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* that he was born in Winnfield, the parish seat of Winn Parish in north central Louisiana (2).<sup>2</sup> Although it is never stated clearly in the novel, we can assume that Willie Stark was born near Mason City (3), the county seat of Mason County (12) in the north of the unnamed Southern state assumed to be Louisiana.<sup>3</sup> Payne makes an interesting observation that such fictitious city names in the novel as “Okaloosa” (134), “Marston” (67), “Harmonville” (134), and “Mason City” (3) come from the names of the actual Louisiana cities of Opelousas, Ruston, Hammond, and Morgan City, respectively (582-83).<sup>4</sup> It may be true that Warren changed “Morgan City” into “Mason City,” but what is more interesting is the fact that the relationship between the fictitious names of the county and the county seat, Mason and Mason City, closely resembles the relationship between the actual names of the parish and the parish seat, Winn and Winnfield. It seems obvious that Warren had in mind the relationship between Winn and Winnfield, when he invented the names of the fictitious county and its county seat.

## ii

Huey P. Long reports in *Every Man a King* that he was born in 1893 (2). On the other hand, Warren does not tell us explicitly in the novel in what year Willy Stark was born. It is undoubtedly because of this that even those critics who see a close resemblance between the career of Long and that of Stark do not realize that Stark was presumably born in 1893, too. These critics are not certain about Stark's ages at various crucial stages of his career, so that they cannot compare and contrast Long's career and Stark's in terms of their respective ages. Payne, for example, does not refer to the

respective ages of Long and Stark at various stages of their careers, while his account of the relationship between Long and Stark is otherwise fairly comprehensive. Another critic, Harold Woodell, does not indicate the year of Stark's birth in the chronology of Stark's career that he formulates (29). There is, however, a passage in *All the King's Men* from which one can infer the year of Stark's birth:

[Stark] had no choice. He had to buy [Gummy Larson, who could dissuade MacMurfee from running for the Senate]. He might have dealt directly with MacMurfee, and have let MacMurfee go to the Senate, with the intention of following up himself when the next senatorial election rolled around. But there were two arguments against that. First, the timing would have been bad. Now was the time for [Stark] to step out. Later on he would be just another Senator getting on toward fifty. Now he would be a boy wonder breathing brimstone. (358)

Here, Jack Burden is recalling the time when Stark had to make a compromise with Gummy Larson in the fall of 1937 concerning the senatorial race. We know that a man named Masters was elected U.S. Senator in 1936 (3, 49). The next senatorial election, then, would come around in 1942. According to the narrator, Stark would be "getting on toward fifty" in 1942, so that we can reasonably assume that he was born in 1893, the year in which Long himself was born.

### iii

Huey P. Long was "the seventh of nine surviving children of Huey P. Long, Sr. [. . .], and Caledonia Tison Long" (Hair 24). On

the contrary, Willie Stark had no siblings. As Long tells us in *Every Man a King*, he had three children (86), whereas Stark had only one child, Tom. Warren obviously felt the altered familial relationship to be more appropriate to such an ultimately isolated man as Stark. Long's mother died in 1913 (Hair 41), the year in which he married Rose McConnell. We do not know in what year Stark's mother died, but Jack Burden tells us that she "had been dead a long time" (24) before Stark and his wife, Lucy, began to live with his father after Stark failed to be reelected the County Treasurer of Mason County in 1922. Thus, we realize that Warren made Stark's early loss of his mother parallel Long's early loss of his own mother. Again, Warren obviously felt Stark's motherless situation to be appropriate to the depiction of Stark as a solitary figure.

According to Hair, Huey P. Long, during his boyhood, talked of becoming "a Baptist preacher" (33). Warren chose to retain Long's Baptist background in the depiction of Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*. Thus, it is said in the novel that Stark attended a Baptist college in a neighboring county for a year (67). According to *Every Man a King*, Long attended the University of Oklahoma from January to May, 1912 (13). It is somewhat surprising to realize that Warren found Long's connection with Oklahoma significant enough to have Stark in the novel stationed for some time in an army camp in Oklahoma toward the end of World War I (67). In his autobiography, Long describes his intensive study of law at Tulane University from October, 1914, to May, 1915 (15-17). Long passed the bar examination in May, 1915 (17). Stark, on the other hand, studied law at home for "about three years" (67) subsequent to his failure to be reelected as the County Treasurer of Mason County in 1922, helping his father with the farm work during the day (61). We can assume, then, that Stark became a lawyer in 1925. Warren

emphasizes the thorough nature of Stark's preparation for the bar examination (67). At the same time, Warren emphasizes the independent nature of Stark's study in order to strengthen Stark's image as a self-made man.

In *All the King's Men*, Willie Stark earned some money by selling his "Fix-It Household Kit" (61, 66) during the three-year period when he prepared for the bar examination. Similarly, according to *Every Man a King*, Huey P. Long worked, on and off, as a traveling salesperson for several firms from 1910 to 1914 (8-15). There is no doubt that Warren got the idea of Stark peddling his Fix-It Household Kit from Long's actual experience as a traveling salesperson.

iv

Just as Huey P. Long opened his legal office in a small room over a bank in Winnfield in 1915 (Long 18), Willie Stark rented a room over a dry-goods store in Mason City for his legal office in 1925 (68). Concerning the early legal careers of Long and Stark, Payne makes an astute observation:

Willie Stark's early legal [. . .] career [. . .] parallels Long's. Huey began with small-claims and workmen's compensation cases and became a well-to-do attacker of corporations; Willie [began] with small claims, [won] his first [significant] battle in a workmen's compensation case, and [became] financially independent attacking an oil company for some independent leaseholders. (583)

Long tells us in *Every Man a King* that he started with some minor

cases (18-25). According to Hair, Long was next involved with a number of laborers' compensation cases (79). According to *Every Man a King*, Long first earned a considerable amount of money, suing a railway company (30-31). Similarly, Stark began with small claims (96), won his first significant legal battle in a laborers' compensation case in 1927 (96), and earned a large amount of money for the first time, fighting against a corporation in a litigation "between an oil company and some independent leaseholders" (96). Furthermore, it appears that this litigation in which Stark was involved is linked to one of Long's early legal triumphs. According to *Every Man a King*, in 1918, Long had a share in an independent oil concern (41). When such large oil companies as the Standard Oil Company, allied closely with the local politicians, tried to place an embargo on their pipelines, Long waged an effective legal and political battle as a member of the Railroad Commission, finally defeating the oil trust after several years (41-50).<sup>5</sup> Stark also began his political career as a public office holder fighting a political machine. As the County Treasurer of Mason County, Stark opposed a contract with a corrupt construction company. Unlike Long, however, Stark temporarily suffered defeat, failing to be reelected to the office of County Treasurer.

In *Every Man a King*, Huey P. Long describes his first campaign for a seat on the Railroad Commission in 1918 as follows:

I canvassed the farmers in person and spent most of my time at night tacking up my campaign posters in the neighborhood being canvassed. (40)

It appears that Warren had this campaign method in mind when he described Willy Stark's effort for reelection as County Treasurer in



1922. *All the King's Men* tells us that Stark "toted [the handbills] around himself, over town, from house to house, carrying them in an old satchel [. . .]" (61).

Warren continued to follow Huey P. Long's career fairly closely in plotting Willie Stark's story. As Payne aptly observes, "[As] Huey used the notice he attracted on the railroad commission to run for governor [in 1924, so Willie ran] for governor [in 1926] because of the attention he attract[ed] as country treasurer" (583). As Payne further points out, "While Huey, unlike Willie, was certainly not tricked into entering the race, it remains true that each man failed in his first attempt at the governorship" (583).<sup>6</sup>

## V

According to Hair, when Huey P. Long ran for governor in 1924, "Huey's campaign team included a pert eighteen-year-old named Alice Lee Grosjean, who many of Long's associates believed was his mistress for most of the rest of his life" (126). As her appointment as Secretary of State in 1930, at the age of 24, drew public attention (208), Warren must have known about Long's rumored relationship with Alice Lee Grosjean. It is reasonable to assume, then, as Payne does, that "Sadie Burke, Willie's secretary, campaign assistant, and confidante, is clearly a modified picture of Alice Lee Grosjean [. . .]" (590). Of course, Sadie Burke was more than "Willie's secretary, campaign assistant, and confidante." Indeed, she was his mistress, just as Alice Lee Grosjean was widely believed to be Long's.

In *All the King's Men*, we learn that Willie Stark sometimes stayed in a hotel in the state capital, while he was given the free use of the governor's mansion. We know, for example, that Stark one time in 1933 conducted his business as Governor at the "Markheim

Hotel" in the state capital (130). Warren makes no explanation of the situation, but he must have known that Huey P. Long used to spend many nights at the Heidelberg Hotel in Baton Rouge (Hair 168). According to Hair, when Long, Rose, and their three children moved into the governor's mansion in 1930, Long furnished Alice Lee Grosjean with living quarters there. Hair goes on to describe the triangular relationship among Huey, Rose, and Alice:

This was too much, even for gentle Rose. She took the children, returned to their Shreveport home [. . .]. Alice then moved out of the mansion and into room 720 in the Heidelberg Hotel. Soon, Rose, daughter Rose, and sons Russell and Palmer came back to the mansion, but when Huey began spending most nights in his hotel suite (room 738, the Heidelberg), his family again left for Shreveport. Thereafter, while Huey was governor, Rose appeared in Baton Rouge only on special occasions. (168)

Lucy Stark did not seem to know anything, Jack Burden says, about the liaison between her husband and his secretary (145). She, however, moved out of the governor's mansion and, after a long visit to Florida, began to live on her sister's poultry farm out of town in 1935 (155-56). She left Willie Stark presumably because she did not approve of the way he wielded his political power, particularly the way he protected Bryam B. White, State Auditor, who seized an unlawful profit (134, 139). There was no absolute break with Willie after she left him. Just as Rose returned to Baton Rouge on special occasions, Lucy would appear in public with Willie, "[n]ow and then, but not often" (156). Thus, we realize that Warren, with some significant changes, followed the actual events which occurred in Long's life in devising the plot of Stark's involvement with Sadie

Burke and that of his wife's separation from him.

vi

Huey P. Long ran for governor in 1928, pledging to "build highways and better schools, provide free textbooks for schoolchildren, and upgrade institutions for the handicapped and mentally ill" (Hair 151). In *Every Man a King*, Long counts among his achievements as governor a remarkable new road system (282-83) and a number of toll-free bridges (283). As Long reports in his autobiography, he was finally able to provide free textbooks for schoolchildren in 1928 (112-14). In *Every Man a King*, Long also speaks of various medical institutions that he either improved or initiated (280-82). Among the medical institutions that Long created was the School of Medicine of the Louisiana State University (280). As for the financial resources for these programs, Long relied on the increased taxation of big corporations and the well-to-do. When Willie Stark unsuccessfully ran for governor in 1926, his platform consisted of "his tax program [and] his road program" (69). At the time of the attempt to impeach Stark in 1933, Warren has Stark make the following address to his supporters gathered outside the capitol:

"I tell you what I am going to do. I am going to build a hospital. The biggest and the finest money can buy. It will belong to you. Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors and know that all will be done that man can do. To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right. It is your right. [. . .] And it is your right that every child shall have a complete education. [. . .] That the man who produces something shall be able to carry it to market without

miring to the hub, without toll. [. . .] That the rich man and the great companies that draw wealth from this state shall pay this state a fair share." (261)

It is obvious that Stark's political stance was almost identical with that of Long.<sup>7</sup>

## vii

The attempt to impeach him in 1933 was the biggest political crisis for Willie Stark as governor. When the opposition group headed by MacMurfee tried to impeach him, Stark took his case to the people: "He roared across the state at eighty miles an hour, the horn screaming, from town to town, crossroads to crossroads, five, or six, or seven, or eight speakings in a day" (145). In response to Stark's call, a huge crowd of people gathered in front of the capitol on April 4, 1933, the day when the impeachment vote was scheduled to be taken (147). The outcome of the impeachment proceedings, however, was a foregone conclusion, because Stark had intimidated and blackmailed the required number of legislators (147, 148-150) to sign "a statement [. . .] to the effect that the undersigned hold that the impeachment proceedings are unjustified and will vote against them [. . .]" (149). The whole episode of the attempt to impeach Stark in *All the King's Men* closely parallels the 1929 attempt to impeach Huey P. Long, as is described in *Every Man a King*. In answer to Long's call for "a mass meeting in [. . .] Baton Rouge" (148), people swamped the city on April 3, 1929. Long later started "a speaking campaign, [. . .] making seven speeches per day" (156-57). On May 16, Senator Philip H. Gilbert filed a motion to halt the impeachment proceedings. He presented a document signed by 15 senators,

one more than required for Long's acquittal, stating that they would not vote for Long's impeachment (169-171). The document was based upon another "round robin" (160). According to Hair, "[p]romises as well as threats were used to induce the fifteen senators to sign" (186) these round robins.

In *All the King's Men*, Willie Stark had Bryam B. White, State Auditor, sign an undated letter of resignation (132). According to Stark, he had "a stack of" (133) undated letters of resignation. Warren seems to have borrowed even this detail in Stark's maneuvering as Hair tells us that "Huey required most appointees to managerial positions to sign undated letters of resignation" (167).

### viii

Just as Huey P. Long never mentioned Alice Lee Grosjean in *Every Man a King*, he also made no reference to his bodyguards. It is a well-known fact, however, that, "[i]ncreasingly fearful for his safety, Governor Long surrounded himself with bodyguards [ . . . ]" (Hair 165). Reading *All the King's Men*, one might get the wrong impression that Warren chose to have Willie Stark have just one bodyguard, Sugar-Boy. The truth of the matter is that Stark had bodyguards other than Sugar-Boy. When Stark went to see Adam Stanton, an expert surgeon, concerning the latter's acceptance of the job as the director of the projected new state hospital, Adam referred to Sugar-Boy as "one of [Stark's] gunmen" (255) that he had heard about. Jack Burden also makes it plain that Stark had at least two more people in a capacity similar to Sugar-Boy's. Narrating Stark's manner of blackmailing and intimidating legislators when he was threatened by impeachment, Jack Burden says:

But this too [happened]: the Boss sitting in the Cadillac, all lights off, in the side street by a house, the time long past midnight. Or in the country, by a gate. The Boss leaning to a man, Sugar-Boy or one of Sugar-Boy's pals, Heavy Harris or Al Perkins, saying low and fast, Tell him to come out. I know he's there. Tell him he better come out and talk to me. If he won't come, just say you're a friend of Ella Lou. That'll bring him." Or, "Ask him if he ever heard of Slick Wilson." Or something of the kind. And then there would be a man standing there with pajama tops stuck in pants, shivering, his face white in the darkness. (147)

## ix

Willie Stark was shot with a pistol by Adam Stanton in the state capitol and died in a hospital a few days later in 1937 (396, 401). Adam was shot to death on the spot by Sugar-Boy (396). Huey P. Long was shot with a pistol by Carl Austin Weiss, one of the best physicians in Baton Rouge, in the state capitol on September 8, 1935 (Hair 322-24), and died in a hospital on September 10 (325). Dr. Weiss was immediately killed with pistol shots by Long's bodyguards (324). It is obvious that Warren heavily relied on the actual circumstances of Long's death in order to depict the events leading to Stark's death. In fact, Warren was careful enough to have Jack Burden mention that Adam Stanton studied abroad (308). It is most likely that Dr. Weiss studied in Vienna for a year and half, beginning in November, 1928 (Miyake 56).

## X

We have seen so far how heavily Warren relied on the life of Huey P. Long in his depiction of the life of Willie Stark. Evidently Warren did a thorough research on Long. He finally succeeded in catching the essence of the Louisiana dictator. When Stark ordered Jack Burden to dig up some dirt on Judge Montague M. Irwin, Jack was skeptical. He believed that it would be a fool's errand.

[. . .] I said, "But suppose there isn't anything to find?"

And the Boss said, "There is always something."

And I said, "Maybe not on the Judge."

And he said, "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something." (49)

According to Hair, Long believed that "everybody in politics had at least one skeleton in his [or her] closet" (267). Reading the passage from the novel quoted above, one gets the feeling that Warren intuitively learned about this belief of Long's. Hair refers to "Huey's addiction to power" (292) and T. Harry Williams asserts that "as [Long] manipulated power he became increasingly fascinated with its uses" (xix). As Warren successfully portrayed him, Willie Stark was a man who was increasingly addicted to power. Thus, when reading *Every Man a King*, we may sometimes have a strange feeling that we are reading Stark's autobiography.

I have put down this note to *All the King's Men* in the belief that we should not naively think that Warren invented the various features of Willie Stark. I do not mean, however, to suggest that our

knowledge of Warren's indebtedness to history lessens in any way the greatness of the novel. As I said earlier, the story of Willie Stark is contained in the larger story of Jack Burden, and, as Payne suggests, Jack is "a wholly fictional narrator" (593). As I have detailed elsewhere, there is a strong thematic link between the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the link between Willie Stark and Jack Burden is much stronger, say, than the one between Captain Ahab and Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* or the one between Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. We have, then, in *All the King's Men*, an exquisite blending of history and creative imagination. The novel becomes even more impressive when we realize how skillfully Warren incorporated the materials about Huey P. Long into the story of the growth of the novel's narrator, Jack Burden.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to the novel, on his way back from California to the state capital, Jack Burden "rode across Texas to Shreveport, Louisiana," (314) where he let off a man returning to northern Arkansas, and he "kept on riding east, and after long enough [he] was home" (314). It would have fitted the general geographical setting better if Jack Burden had headed southeast, after stopping at Shreveport.

<sup>2</sup>When the information given in Huey P. Long's autobiography accords with the relevant information given in William Ivy Hair's *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long*, one of the most reliable biographies of Long, I quote the autobiography.

<sup>3</sup>As the novel opens, we learn that one drives "northeast" (1) from the state capital to Mason City. However, in order to travel



from Baton Rouge to Winnfield, one would drive "northwest." Warren is apparently making a deliberate alteration to the actual geography.

<sup>4</sup>It may have escaped Payne's attention, but Warren uses the name of an actual Louisiana parish, La Salle, as the name of a county in the unnamed Southern state in the novel, "La Salle County" (216).

<sup>5</sup>Payne's statement that "Long was elected to the railroad commission as the little man's champion [in 1918] and lost his power after he attacked Standard Oil for some independent oil companies" (583) does not square with the actual history. The Railroad Commission was renamed and strengthened as the Public Service Commission in 1921 and Long was made chairperson of the new Commission in 1922 (Hair 115-18). Long was reelected to the Public Service Commission with utmost ease in 1924 (Hair 139-41).

<sup>6</sup>Hair says that "[the] issue that snatched away [Long's] chance for winning in 1924 was the Ku Klux Klan, because it separated the Catholic voters he needed from the Protestant voters he already had. [ . . . ] He was not able to convince a sufficient number of poor Catholic voters either that class interests overrode the Klan question or that he was genuinely anti-Klan" (128-36). It is interesting to note that a race issue was involved in Stark's defeat, not in his gubernatorial election but in his reelection as County Treasurer. The man that headed the County Commission successfully turned the voters against Stark, alleging that the construction company which Stark was supporting would bring in a large number of African-American workers (60).

<sup>7</sup>Critics in general seem to be unaware of the import of the opening scene of the novel:

To get [to Mason City] you follow Highway 58, going northeast

out of the [state capital], and it is a good highway and new. Or was new, that day [in 1936] we went up it. You look up the highway and it is straight for miles [. . .]. (1)

Jack Burden is narrating the story in 1939 (3, 51, 438) and he is referring to the state highway constructed most likely in 1936, that is, during the second term of Stark's governorship. Warren thus begins the novel with a reference to one of Stark's major achievements as governor. As we read on, we realize that Warren circumspectly has Jack Burden describe the old road which he rode on in 1922:

[. . .] I went up [to Mason City] in my Model-T, hanging on to the steering post to stay in the saddle when I sideslipped in the gray dust, which plumed out behind for a mile and settled on the cotton leaves to make them gray too, or when I hit a section of gravel, holding my jaws clamped tight to keep the vibration from the washboard from chipping the enamel off my teeth. (51)

<sup>8</sup> Yosuke Murakami, "Self-Destruction and Rebirth in *All the King's Men*." *Jimbun Kenkyu* (Bulletin of the Faculty of Literature, Osaka City University) Vol. 30, No. 3 (1978):84-95.

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