A LITERARY BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES STILL: A BEGINNING

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the School of Humanities
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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Date
This is the first biographical study on the author and poet James Still. It is not a complete biography. I have presented basic information from his birth until the present, with an emphasis on his literary years. It is not possible in a study of this length to give a detailed account of his life and work.

A major portion of the data is from personal interviews and phone calls from myself to the author. Access to the "James Still Room" at Camden Carroll Library has been invaluable.

To indicate the relation between his life and his writing, I have included an exposition of his novel River of Earth, and a synopsis of two short stories, "The Nest" and "The Scrape."

It is my hope that this study will generate further interest in the work of James Still.
Accepted by: Charles J. Pepe, Chairman
Rossi
MK Thomas
CHRONOLOGY

1906  James Still, born Double Creek, Chamber County, Alabama
1924  Enters Lincoln Memorial University
1929  Graduates LMU
1930  Works on M.A. degree at Vanderbilt University
1931  Enters University of Illinois, B.S. library science
1932  Becomes Recreation Leader, Hindman Settlement School
1933  Becomes librarian at Hindman
1936  "The Scrape" ("On Defeated Creek") published by Frontier and Midland
1937  "Hounds on the Mountain" published by Viking
1938  Fellowship to Breadloaf
1939  Fellowship to McDowell Colony
1940  River of Earth published by Viking
1941  On Troublesome Creek published by Viking
1943  Enters U.S. Army Air Corps
1946  Second Guggenheim Award
1961  Dedication of James Still Room Camden-Carroll Library
1963  Writer-In-Residence at MSU
1968  Second printing of River of Earth
1971  Teaching positions, Fall semester at Ohio University Branch Portsmouth and Spring semester at Berea College

1972  Beginning of ten year trips to Central America to study Mayan civilization

1978  Third printing of *River of Earth* (University of Kentucky Press)
      Library building at Hindman renamed in honor of James Still

1980  Published *The Run for the Elbertas*, University of Kentucky Press
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Chapter I
Introduction

Information gathered about a living person must of necessity be incomplete. The definitive biography of James Still is yet to be written. Nonetheless, a biographical sketch, such as the one I offer here, can be a very useful first step. James Still will be seventy-eight July 16, 1984. He is very much alive and still writing. This sketch is a compilation of factual research and personal reminiscence, phone calls and letters received from friends. A descriptive exposition of River of Earth, his novel, and two short stories are included to provide a view of the man through his work.

It is a dangerous and difficult task to delve deeply into the life of a human being, especially the life of an artist. As Emily Dickinson warns us to probe the mysteries of nature kindly, so should we walk softly into the life of a human being. The truth of a situation often evades us whenever we gaze too deeply:

To pity those that know her now
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.1

So the living artist may remain somewhat mysterious to us, though this sketch introduces us to the man behind the work.

In the summer of 1970 Bruce B. Brown directed the first Appalachian Writer's Workshop at Pikeville College. The staff included Harriette Arnow, David Madden, Hollis Summers and James Still. This was my first encounter with James Still. Being a participant in the workshop gave me the privilege of having my work read by one of the writers. Mr. Still did not read my work, but I can still recall his rather aloof manner during the evening readings.

From that summer of 1970 until the present, I have had the honor of being in James Still's presence at least once a year, either through workshops or dinner at the houses of friends. It was not until the winter of 1981 that I actually read James Still's work. Like many young literature majors faced with Appalachian authors, my arrogance stood like a boulder between us. The response was, "Why should I read about Appalachia? I am Appalachia." In time, the broadening of my intellect and increasing maturity finally allowed me to open the cover of River of Earth. With a sense of guilt I quickly sent out a letter of apology and sincere praise to James Still about his novel, River of Earth, praise a little overdue, on a book that he had written forty years before. I also bought copies of his books of short stories and read them with equal delight. At the time Mr. Still received my letter, he was in Florida preparing for one of his yearly junkets to Central
America. I was grateful for his prompt reply and apparent lack of resentment. Following is a copy of that letter:

St. Petersburg, Florida
February 16, 1981

Dear Rhonda England:

(what a wonderful name!)

Thank you for kind words for River of Earth and The Run for the Elbertas.* When they come out of the blue they are all the more appreciated. Do you realize that for ten years or more after River was published nobody told me they had read the book?

I'm here in St. Petet thawing out and revving up for my 9th foray into Central America. Going it alone again. Could talk nobody into accompanying me.

Expect to be back home for that most glorious of season -- the Appalachian Spring.

Regards to Quenton & Bruce & Randy.

Yrs,

James Still

*You may find the cream of my fiction is in Pattern of a Man.
Later that year I heard a rumor that James had been very ill. I used the titles of his short stories in *The Run for the Elbertas* to make up a dinner invitation to my place:

August 20, 1981

Dear James,

The green beans and white hickory cane have already been canned or frozen and knotty little apples are falling from the trees in everyone's orchards. It is well past the time for a summer cook-out but I would like to have a sharing of the harvest with you and some people we know.

I will not burn down the house if'n you eat every vittle. I might even serve you some late "Elbertas," and even though "School" is in session the children haven't eaten up all the "Butter." I know you do not like night driving."I Love My Rooster Too" so I thought around 4:00 on September 5th would be a better time for you to "Journey to the Forks." I am inviting one of those "Proud Walkers," Bruce B. Brown, that "Fun Fox," Quentin Howard, and if they can get away
from the "Stir Off," Lillie Chaffins and John Preston.

Perhaps you could read us "The Moving" story of "Locust Summer," whilst we "Burn off the Waters" in a toast of Kentucky rye. There was some kind of rumor that you had been ill but I know even if you had "One Leg Gone to Judgement" you wouldn't miss a shindig that promises more fun than the one on "Quicksand Creek."

James, in all sincerity and with great fun, I hope you are not ill and can come on Saturday at 4:00 to my school on Williamson Road for a lovely dinner.

Sincerely,

Rhonda England

He did come to the party although he had just recovered from a long stay in the hospital. We started the evening off with tall iced glasses of bourbon and water. James had two to my one. He ate spiced chicken, garlic bread, summer salad and topped this off with coconut cream pie and coffee for dessert. During the course of the meal we learned that he had been hospitalized due
James Still and Rhonda England at the house beside Dead Mare Branch, Little Carr Creek. Photographed by Terry Cornett on November 21, 1984.
to a serious gall bladder attack. I was amazed that a man of his age showed no concern about what he ate or drank. Yet he has always seemed oblivious about his personal appearance as to weight or age. So it is difficult to imagine him nearing his eighties.

After this party I saw him briefly at the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Centenary which was held in November 1981. I did not see him again until the James Still Festival at Emory and Henry College, Emory, Virginia. The Festival was held on the 19th, 20th, and 21st of October 1983. Such writers as Jim Wayne Miller, Fred Chappell, and Daniel Marion gathered there to speak in honor of James Still. I talked to James at this meeting and asked for his cooperation in the work on his biography. He agreed to help me and invited me to his log house on Dead Mare Branch.

On a mild Sunday in November, Quentin Howard and I drove to the house on Dead Mare Branch. Mr. Howard, editor of Wind magazine, is a long-time acquaintance of James Still's.

James was in the process of washing dishes when we arrived, so I took the opportunity to survey the house and surrounding land. It is an ancient log house, now on the register of historical houses in the state. James lives here only in good weather preferring the comfort of his town house during the winter months.

Vestiges of the summer garden, dead vines and stalks surrounded the house. Although the Amburgeys live just down the road, they really do not intrude. Still says, they sort of adopted him years ago. In fact, he was in the process of preparing the dressing for
their Thanksgiving turkey when we arrived. In times past he has cooked the complete meal for them. His dressing, a concoction made with a great number of beaten egg whites was a contrast to the regular cornbread dressing. I am told he is quite a gourmand.

We sat in the main room, a combination bedroom-workroom. A bed against one wall was occupied by a big yellow cat. We sat around a small table in the center of the room. From the gas heater that had been installed in front of the fireplace, a small flame was visible. The front door was open and we sat and watched the November rain through the screened door.

James told us about taking a neighbor to the health clinic in Hindman and having some moles removed himself while he was there. He laughed about the doctor's remarks on his youthful physique. "I guess I take after my father," he said. He then proceeded to tell us how youthful his father remained until his death in 1957. When I asked about his mother, he said, "My mother died at the early age of fifty-five. She just worked herself to death, too meticulous about the house and all."²

We talked until four o'clock that November afternoon. After many phone calls, letters from his friends, rereading of all his work and a great deal of research, I was finally able to piece together the fragments caught here and there to complete a biographical sketch of James Still the writer, and the man.

²Personal interview with James Still, November 20, 1984.
I would like to reiterate that this is a biographical sketch. It is not an in-depth biography. The research and writing has been conducted over a seven month period. It has taken that much time to correlate the time, place, and events in the life of James Still. I believe it will serve as a very important preliminary guide to a complete in-depth biography. When I selected this thesis I had no idea that I would encounter so many and varied limitations. Although James Still has been very gracious with his contributions in one sense, he has been very limiting in another. He is akin to Willa Cather in his wish to have his life seen only through his work. He related many significant incidents in his life that he would not permit me to use in this study.

Some very good scholars on James Still would not permit me access to their materials. This only increased my interest and admiration for his work.

The time factor was my greatest limitation. An in-depth biography would entail years of research and travel. However, I do feel that this study fulfills its purpose. It is a road map, a point of reference that did not exist before.
Chapter II
The Life of James Still

On Double Creek

I was born on Double-Creek, on a forty-acre hill.

North was the Buckalew Ridge, south at our land’s end.

The county poor farm with hungry fields
And furrows as crooked as an adder’s track.

Across the creek I saw the paupers plowing.
I can remember their plodding in the furrows,
Their palsied hands, the worn flesh of their faces,
And their odd shapelessness, and their tired cries,
I can remember the dark swift martins in their eyes.3

Double Creek was the whole world to a six year old. The nearest town was Lafayette, Alabama, and it seemed more like a made-up town the grown-ups spoke of. On Double Creek the world stood still. Red earth, blue sky in summer and the everlasting hills made up the world of the child James Still. He lived on a

hill. It was a big old house, large enough to hold grandmother and grandfather, mother and father, and brothers and sisters. James Alexander Still, Jr., was the first male heir in a line of girls born to James Alexander and Barcylvania Anne Dorie Lindsay Still. Carrie Anne was the first born in 1893. She was followed by, Elloree, 1896, Nixie Pearl, 1898, Barcylvania, 1900, Maude Inez, 1903 and James Alexander, 1906. After James followed William Comer, 1908, Thomas Watson, 1911, and Alfred Theodore, 1914.

The entire community of Double Creek consisted of two families: the maternal grandparents, James Benjamin Franklin Lindsay and Carrie, and the paternal grandparents William Watson Still and Annie. They were a mixture of English and Scottish descent. Early pioneer stock, the two families had settled at Double Creek and uncles, aunts, and cousins inhabited the entire community. Their livelihood consisted of farming, although James Alexander, Senior, earned quite a reputation as a "horse doctor." Cash flow in the early 1900's was not of main importance as the country was still very much inclined to barter as a way of life. People living in such close proximity often have greater difficulties if there is intermarriage. Still says there was an apparent hostility between the two groups of grandparents. It may even be a safety valve on people having by necessity to live so close.

Education was stressed by both parents although the means of obtaining one in the early 1900's was very difficult for the majority of the citizens. Schools were few in number and centrally
located. James attended school in Lafayette. Along with his brothers and sisters, he walked the distance of two miles one way. There were three books in the home: The Holy Bible, Anatomy of the Horse, and a 'Cyclopedia of Universal Knowledge, titled, Palaces of Pleasure. Still recalls this book with great pleasure, "It had some foreign language lessons in it and I quickly acquired a second language." This must have been a source of agitation to the rest of the household to be answered in some kind of Arabic language.4

Still spent much of his childhood with his maternal grandparents, the Lindsays, who were earthy, fun-loving people. He remarked years later that his sense of the past was fulfilled by his grandparents. As evidence of their historical past, James recalls that his paternal grandfather lost a finger in the Civil War and his maternal grandmother lost her first husband in the conflict.

When James was eleven years old, the family left the farm at Double Creek. In search of more lucrative business as a veterinarian, Still's father moved the family into the village of Shawmut in the Chattahoochee Valley. It was in this small town library that Still encountered Honore Balzac's Father Goriot. James recalls the effect that this exposure had on his life:

"I became aware that I could experience more lives than one through the world of books." \(^5\)

By age twelve Still was increasing the family's income by picking cotton. Sometimes with his father and sometimes with neighbor boys, they worked as far as Texas. They slept in barn-lofts or under the stars. The hours were long and the work hard. James says that cotton is the one crop you can see to pick even in the dark. But this work was to prepare him for the future in ways that the boy James Still could not have known. The endurance of hard living conditions and of working long hours was the early training that would enable him to attain his future goals.

**1924-1932**

Through all of the wanderings Still did manage to graduate from Fairfax High School located in the Chattahoochee Valley, in his native state of Alabama. He then enrolled at Lincoln Memorial University in 1924. From an account written in 1940 the *Lincoln Herald* gives a brief synopsis of his personality, economic situation, and honors during his stay in East Tennessee:

He came with forty dollars in his pocket and made a trembling, hesitant appeal to the business manager, C.P. Williams, for a chance

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\(^5\)Anne Commire, "James Still," *Something About the Author Cyclopedia*, 1982, pp. 198-199.
to work out his expenses. He did not make any dominant impression with his personality, for he was not a large chap, and he had a retiring disposition. With an inflexible will and unfailing determination he set to work on the business of getting an education. He worked out all of the remainder of his expenses by running the whole gamut of student employment around the University.

In the time of his student work, James was gathering good and bad grades and his flair for writing soon became evident in his literary assignments. Four or five essay contests were won during his student career. One year he won the Lincoln essay prize of $25.00 on the subject, "Lincoln's Place in Literature." He joined the Grant-Lee Literary Society but when the organization was transformed into a Greek-letter outfit, due to the influx of new students with new ideas, he quit in disgust. He did his "good turn" for the little boys in the community by organizing a Boy Scout Troop for Harrogate. He had sunk his roots so deeply into East Tennessee soil by the time he was to
graduate in 1929, it was difficult for him to tear away. 6

Whether it was the time, place, or people involved is not determined, but some important writers were at Lincoln Memorial in the same period. Harry Harrison Kroll was one of the professors at LMU when James was there. Kroll, himself is a well known author and poet. He is author of Riders in the Night, Fury in the Earth and others. His students who were to go on and become successful writers were: Jesse Stuart, author of some seventy-five books, Don West, well-known poet and novelist, and James Still. Among Don West's books of poetry are "O Mountaineer!" and "Clods of Southern Earth." Julia Yenni, author of House of the Sparrow and others, was a fellow classmate also.

In an interview (1979) James comments upon his fellow classmates:

We have been referred to as "the barefoot boys." Myself, Jess, and Don. Yes, we have different careers. We chose the "path less traveled by." Don is the poet of the disinherited. And Jess wrote most of the books, some seventy-five of them, that came out of the Class of 1929. Why the Class of 1929

6Lincoln Herald, 42, (Harrogate, Tennessee: Lincoln Memorial University Press, 27 January 1940), 32.
spawned us I don't know. Stuart, I understand, has given credit to Kroll. Kroll had no connection with me, or, I believe, with Don West. 7

Seeking further information about these years, I sent out letters of request to two friends Still met during that time. Following are two letters written by them, the First by Dare Redmond.

Woodlawn, Virginia
February 21, 1984

Rhonda England
Pikeville, Kentucky

Dear Ms. England:

I received your letter of February 14. I met James Still soon after the beginning of our freshman year at Lincoln Memorial University. We were together for four years of college and one year at the University of Illinois Library School. At L. M. U. we were both working to pay our college expenses. We

often worked together doing anything that needed to be done on the campus, from cutting grass and washing windows to working in a rock quarry. During our last two years of college we worked together in the Library.

Since our funds were very limited, our recreation while in college consisted mainly of simple things such as walking, talking, and reading. Sometimes we would walk to Cumberland Gap on Sunday afternoon. In order to have an excuse for taking the trip and not walk aimlessly, we would go for a candy bar or ice cream.

The things I remember most about Still at first were his magnetic personality and his ability to express himself well in writing. He could demand attention in a crowd, but he seemed to prefer the company of one person or a small group. Later I learned to appreciate his keen sense of humor. I can still remember many of the jokes we shared and the laughs we had. His humor was kindly in nature, but any pompous individual could be the object of his ridicule. However, he would not tolerate any ridicule of a minority group or any person with a disability.
Still helped me in more ways than I can tell. His help and encouragement enabled me to get through college and library school. Sometimes he was critical, but I knew that it was because he wanted me to improve. It was constructive criticism, and I knew that he was sincere. When he urged me to read a certain book I knew that it was worth reading. For example, he asked me to read Far From the Madding Crowd, which I enjoyed very much and it started me to reading and enjoying almost all of the novels of Thomas Hardy. He helped me to appreciate the best in literature and music, and I still benefit from his ideas and observations.

My best wishes for your work on your thesis.

Sincerely yours,

Dare Vincent Redmond

The second letter, which recalls Still during Lincoln Memorial years, comes from Roland Carter.
Some Thoughts about Dr. James Still

In the more than fifty years that I have known Dr. James Still, beginning with our early student days at Lincoln Memorial University, I have admired his pervasive sense of loyalty -- to his trade, to his subject matter, and to his friends. This quality is not achieved overnight, nor maintained by an incident or two now and then. It covers a wide spectrum of one's life and eventually characterizes the man. As a young student, he recognized ideals which soon became goals he would pursue, and in time, settled him into the very demanding discipline of writing at which he became an artist.

Critics point out his precision in choice of words to delineate characters and narrate actions. Dr. Still tells of his "playing with words," trying this one and then that one, until he "felt" which best serves. With the sensitiveness of a pianist, he makes it the right "note" before he leaves it. This is the craftsmanship for which he is acclaimed.

He has been loyal to the people among whom he has chosen to live. The report of an L.M.U.
faculty member's being awarded a James Still Fellowship (LMU Alumnus, Summer, 1983, p. 11) stated: "The Fellowships bear James Still's name in recognition of his long-standing commitment to the mountain region, his deep insight into mountain ways, and his dedication to education, to knowledge, and to his genius in writing about the region."

Dr. Still is a friendly man. While I am sure there are many who have a casual acquaintance with him, I cannot imagine a casual friendship with him. Those who know him feel the fervor and freshness which he brings to every contact. A conversation with him is substantive, for he generously shares events from his work and his travels.

Being friends with Dr. Still is not a come-and-go relationship. After his warm and informal greeting, one is assured he cared enough to arrange a visit and is not begrudging the time. As an illustration of genuine and lasting friendship, one need look no further than the neighborliness and general rapport he has enjoyed for many years with the people in and around Hindman Settlement. He received
their kindnesses and, in turn, lifted them into view of the nation.

Sincerely,

Roland Carter
Chattanooga, Tenn.
21 Feb. 1984

It is during the Lincoln Memorial years that the two most obvious traits of James Still begin to appear: his deep interest in the less-fortunate and his love for literature. The term humanitarian has been so misused that one is hesitant to use it, but it appropriately describes his compassion and interest in what he would call "primitive" or "pure" culture. Such an interest seems essential in the development of the artist; for it is doubtful that great art comes into existence without the humane element being present in the artist.

Poverty and injustice were major factors in the turbulent thirties, and throughout the Appalachian chain the fight for the union was an ongoing activity. James Still worked for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the summer of 1930. He recalls this time in an interview with Appalachian Journal in 1979:

While a student at Vanderbilt University in 1930 I went to Wilder, Tennessee, to help distribute clothing and food collected in Nashville. In Wilder the scabs lived on one
side of town, the strikers on the other. I had never witnessed or imagined people actually starving, but there they were in the United States of America. There has been a movement lately to give a more "balanced" view, as they say, to state the side of the mine owners, to stress the fact of their limited profits in those years. I equate the mine owner with the gun thugs they hired. They killed Barney Graham at Wilder, and many another miner elsewhere. So you see there's a mote in my eye, difficult to remove. The scales remain unbalanced. Yes, I was aware that destiny rode with these people. Their destiny and mine. We were one, then as now.⁸

James had taken a stand and one which he has always maintained. Injustice, poverty, and cruelty among human beings are the things he cannot accept as necessities of the human condition.

The year 1930 was also a year of personal loss for James Still. Someone once said "You have to grow up when you lose your mother and you no longer have a home to go to." James lost his mother in February

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of that year. Although several years later James Alexander, Senior, remarried and sired a son, Don, Alabama wasn't home to James Still anymore.

Completing his M.A. in English at Vanderbilt, James felt he was not sufficiently equipped for the lifestyle he wanted. He entered the University of Illinois to earn a B.S. degree in library science. It is this interest that brought James Still to the Hindman Settlement School, Hindman, Knott County, Kentucky in 1932.

The Hindman Settlement School and Later Years
(1932-1984)

Due to the isolation of Appalachia it has always been far behind the rest of the country in its social conditions. This factor has contributed to an onslaught of missionaries throughout its history. Hindman Settlement School was created by one of these ventures.

May Stone and Katherine Pettit were the original founders of Hindman Settlement School. They began their work in 1902. Theirs was a sociological movement rather than a religious one, with practical living exercises as an important part of the curriculum. Although working under the auspices of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, home and health education were the strong points of their curriculum.
They began their work in a five room school house, pitching tents on the hillside for their living quarters. Aristocratic ladies from the Bluegrass section, they amazed the mountain people with their skill and knowledge. Through several fires and floods the women endured and built a school of statewide renown. The novel The Quare Women or The Glass Window, written by novelist and teacher Lucy Furman provides one of the best historical backgrounds of the school. Lucy Furman and poet Ann Cobb were among the first writers to teach at Hindman Settlement School. 9

By the year 1932 the school was well established as one of the finest preparatory schools in the state. Several buildings had been added along with dormitories and a library of 10,000 volumes.

James Still became the recreation leader at Hindman Settlement School in 1932. This was a temporary position for James as he was made the librarian the next year. Only the young and idealistic would travel so far for so little gain materialistically. During an interview in 1979 James recalls these years:

I worked three years without pay, as did others, and glad of the employment. We were fed, sheltered. The fourth year the school managed to pay me fifteen dollars a month, and increased it a mite the next two. Over the six-year

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period I averaged six cents a day. And why did I stay on? No amount of money could have substituted for the joy I felt from 1932 to 1939. The literary juices were flowing. I was beginning to publish in The Atlantic, The Yale Review, The Virginia Quarterly, The Sewanee Review, The New Republic, The Nation, and others.\textsuperscript{10}

Here as in Tennessee, James involved himself with the mountain youth. He formed Boy Scout Troops and ball clubs, and became the first walking bookmobile in the hills. By loading boxes of books on his shoulders, he traveled up the creeks and hollows to distribute books to the shut-ins. This brought him into contact with the people and their lifestyles in an authentic way. Shunning urban sophistication, James preferred the honesty and originality found in the mountain people.

The Appalachian culture became the inspiration and provided background for his literary work. In 1936, "The Scrape," his first short story, was published by Frontier and Midland with the original title "On Defeated Creek." In 1937, Hounds On the Mountain, a book of poetry, was published by Viking Press. Due to the success of this book, James was awarded a fellowship to Breadloaf Writer's

Conference the same year. This was followed in 1938 by a fellowship to McDowell Colony, and in 1939 a fellowship to Yaddo. It was around this time that he discovered the log cabin on Carr Creek. During an interview in 1979 Still was asked why he wanted to live in such isolation. Still replied with the same simplicity as some of the characters in his work:

I wasn't satisfied with the place where I was living. Then one day I saw this place and knew it was what I had been looking for all of my life -- remote, picturesque and quiet. Also, I wanted to dig in the ground, to grow things. I'm a peasant at heart. It's not merely a sustained interest with me - it's a passion. I'm overtaken by it annually when the birds begin to hallo in the spring. Well, I moved over to the farm beside Dead Mare Branch and into a log house which records in Letcher County say was standing in 1840 - now a part of Knott County - myth in action. As I tell it, after six years of coolie wages I was so rich I retired. The house is not a cabin, mind you, a two-story log house. A cabin by definition is a temporary structure, pitched together, probably of unskinned poles. This house - the
Jethro House as some refer to it - is now
designated a pioneer landmark structure
by the Kentucky Historical Commission. The
farm was nine miles over a wagon-rutted road
from the county seat, some stretches of it
in the creekbed. One neighbor said of me
at the time, "He's just left a good teaching
job and came over in here and just sot down."
I did sit down - to a typewriter and completed
a novel. 11

In the log house at Dead Mare James completed the novel
River of Earth, depicting one family's life during the Depression
years.

Whether it is the age that creates the man or the man that
creates the age is one of those moot questions. That the Depression
years inspired some of our country's finest works of art cannot be
was compared to River of Earth. John Steinbeck's The Grapes of
Wrath was published the same year. Gone With the Wind by Margaret
Mitchell and Now in November by Josephine Johnson were both pub-
lished in the late thirties. These were the years in which names
like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Katherine Ann Porter and

Pearl Buck were becoming well known. A crisis in the economy as well as in the personal life of man could possibly contribute to the worst or best of times.

In 1941, *On Troublesome Creek*, a collection of short stories was published by Viking. And in the same year Still was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. At the peak of his literary career Still entered the U.S. Army Air Corps. He was assigned to the North African Campaign, where he remained until 1945.

This is not a period of his life that Still dwells upon. For he, like many other young men, returned from the war maimed, if not in body, in spirit. There is no way to justify the horrors of war. I believe it undermined his whole value structure. James voices the aftermath of the destruction years in an interview of 1979:

The same person who went away didn't return from the war, he mused. I had changed, this hollow had changed and my neighbors had changed. I used to say that the people here would always be the same, but I returned to find many of them saying their children wouldn't work for anything but money. I knew then they had changed. I was mixed up, I didn't write, I didn't read; I just sat in the
door and played the dulcimer. I haven't
touched one since.12

Although his stories were being republished in all of the
popular magazines, James was not writing anything new. His second
Guggenheim Fellowship came at this time and, as James says, it was
a "lifesaver." For it provided the time he needed to readjust to
life after the war. He travelled to Alabama only to discover that
there was no longer a place called Double Creek. The city of
Lafayette had grown over the fields and hills of his childhood.
Brothers and sisters had scattered to different states and the
change was everywhere.

He resumed his position as librarian at Hindman in 1951.
During this time he began teaching at writers' workshops at
Morehead State University and other places.

In 1961 Morehead State University dedicated the James Still
Room in the Camden-Carroll Library in honor of him.

Still was hired as writer-in-residence at Morehead State Uni-
versity in 1963. He taught many standard courses and participated
in the writer's workshops. He has participated in fourteen writer's
workshops, some of them conducted on campuses other than MSU.

He corresponded with and had private meetings with such
literary figures as: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Katherine Ann

12Joe Creason, "Some Things A Man Does Just for Himself," The
Porter, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. In a 1979 interview Still was asked if he was not of the same literary school as Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Although Still denies being influenced by any particular author, it would be difficult to deny what Flannery O'Connor says about influence:

I think the writer is initially set going by literature more than by life. When there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more careful that he isn't just doing badly what had already been done to completion. The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down. 13

In 1968 Popular Library came out with a second publication of River of Earth. Although the sales were satisfactory, Still was not happy with the book. The front cover gives a totally deceptive picture of the book. Among the letters I received from friends,

the following from poet and teacher Bruce Bennett Brown, was the most enlightening from the sixties:

14 March 1984
Box 157 Upper Coon Rd.
Raccoon, KY 41557

Dear Rhonda ---

I am sending to you a note on James Still (in some kind of outline form). I have known about Jim's work since I was in the sixth grade in 1947. I first met him in 1957.

When I was in grade school, a friend of mine, the poet Sylvia Trent Auxier (NO STRANGER TO THE EARTH and WITH THORN AND STONE), supplied me with books and all kinds of suggestions on reading and authors. Through her and my sister I found and read almost all of Jim's work as it was published. Sylvia took me to meet him at Berea College at the first Appalachian Conference, sponsored, I believe, by the Ford Foundation. I was a high school delegate. Jim told me later that he was not an invited participant to the conference. I do not know the reason. One day while there we had lunch with
Jim, Doris Miller (book editor for the Huntington Herald Advertiser) John Jacob Niles, composer and folksinger, and Harriette Arnow. We took pictures on the chapel steps and we all looked young! Sylvia, Doris and John Jacob are now dead. Jim asked me at that time what I had written or was writing. He told me not to worry about early publication, but to read, read, read. Later my high school journalism teacher, Quentin R. Howard (now editor of WIND Magazine) would clip all of Jim's published work and file it away. He gave me the folder after I graduated.

I got to know Jim on a more formal literary level during the 1950 writing workshops at Morehead State College (now Morehead State University). He introduced me to some of his friends: Temple Baker, Mary Elizabeth Schwartz, David Koons and Albert Stewart (the then editor of the Morehead workshop magazine). I also met James McConkey, Hollis Summers, Jane Mayhall, Lucien Stryk and Collister Hutchinson. Wendell Berry was also a student in the workshop with me. James Still and Collister Hutchison were the highlights of the
workshop as far as I'm concerned. Her TOWARD DAYBREAK is as lasting and universal as Jim's RIVER OF EARTH. Billy Clark and Jesse Stuart made appearances at the workshops sometimes. One summer Jesse Stuart's influential high school English teacher was present, a Mrs. Vorhees.

Later when Jim began to teach at Morehead (to help maintain his brother in a sanitarium), I would visit him in his departmental office (in the summer sessions) and we would talk informally about writing, poets and books. On two occasions he read Emily Dickinson's poetry aloud in the evening before dinner, and always included the poem . . . "I could not stop for death . . . ." During one of those late summers he had gone to New England and visited Emily's grave in Amherst. Later I found out that this was during one of his trips to the writer's retreat Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York. I think perhaps Jim thought I was shy and too much a solitary. Sometimes he would ask me to play a recording of Mozart's chamber music in the listening room of the Johnson-Camden Library. We would listen quietly
without talking and after a length of time, 
Jim would get up and leave without saying anything.

He invited me to come to his retirement tea when he left Morehead College in the early 1970's. I drove down and went to a small gathering in the library in the afternoon. Later we drove all over Rowan County (it seemed) and Jim talked about his future writing plans and other things that he wished to do. He talked a great deal about Elizabeth Madox Roberts, a favorite writer of both of us. I think she is the one direct artistic and stylistic influence of his creative concepts. He had visited her at home in Springfield, Kentucky. Jim was amazed when I knew the name of her house, Elenores. There is an almost hidden marker with the name in the corner of the garden, placed there by Mr. and Mrs. John Pile, the then owner of the house. Last year I understand the Roberts house was auctioned. I do not know the present owners. EMR always championed Jim's work and wrote her first jacket blurb for his novel RIVER OF EARTH. Her last letter to him
just before her death reads like a deliberate understated premonition. In 1981 Jim was included in the centenary symposium on EMR at St. Catherine's College, Springfield. EMR had driven Jim down the road taken by Ellen Chesser in TIME OF MAN, past the school where EMR once taught, and past the forks in the road where Ellen's family let the horse decide the way that last fateful night. Later that evening after we had eaten at the Holiday Inn, Jim took me to his apartment and gave me a picture of himself and a copy of Christopher Morley's tribute to Don Marquis:

Energy is not endless, better hoard it for your own work. Be intangible and hard to catch, be secret and proud and inwardly uncomfortable. Say yes and don't mean it; pretend to agree; dodge every kind of organization, and evade, elude, recede. Be about your affairs, as you would also forbear from others at theirs, and thereby show your respect for the holiest ghost we know, the creative imagination.
He said that he had lived with this for years and 
that now I could live with it.

When I became Director of the Library and 
creative writing teacher every other semester at 
Pikeville College, Pikeville, Kentucky, James 
Still would come and lecture to my evening 
classes. Once he read from HOUNDS ON THE MOUN-
TAIN and during another evening he responded to 
open questions from the small class. He was 
also on the staff of the first Appalachian 
Writing Workshop that I directed at the college, 
along with David Madden, Harriette Arnow, Hollis 
Summers and a few campus writers. I was also 
editor of TWIGS Magazine and this group was 
featured in 1969 Fall issue. When I had a new 
poem published in Appalachian Review (W. Va. 
University), Jim wrote me the first fan letter.

In 1973 I opened a small gourmet restaurant 
and Jim became a steady customer. He would drive 
over to Pikeville from Hindman two or three 
times a month for dinner. He would bring his 
own beer and visit with a few local writers and 
interested readers. We had a small reading area 
in the restaurant, covering tastes from PLAYGIRL 
to YALE REVIEW. Jim always laughingly referred to
this collection as my radical and "pubic" library. He also brought other friends from the Hindman Settlement School.

Throughout the years, usually in the Spring, I would get a call from Jim to come to Dead Mare Branch at Mallie for lunch. On these occasions I usually took champagne to drink under those flowering trees that shelter his ancient log house. One year he gave me great bunches of jonquils to bring and decorate my house and my office at the library. Jim's gardens are primal and mysterious. One time just before going in to eat, we were admiring his rows of bunch beans. When we came out two hours later the rows of beans had faded from the face of the earth. Rabbits had eaten well too while we dined on baked chicken and a tangy salad (Jim's original) made with dill, cottage cheese, almonds, bananas, green onions and oregano. His beer rolls are excellent with such a meal. Jim cooks well and his luncheons are planned late. This adds up to a gourmet's fantasy. On one of these luncheon days Jim pulled out the second drawer of a metal filing cabinet and showed me twenty-seven chapters of
a novel in progress. And he drove me to downtown Hindman and pointed out the street corner where he had left the main character in the novel. He also told me that thirty years before it was published, he had sat on the couch beside Katherine Anne Porter, in her home, while she read aloud from the manuscript of her SHIP OF FOOLS. Sigrid Undset (the Nobel Prize winning author) and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings considered Jim's work to be very important. During my teaching days at Pikeville College, Jim spent the night at my house and autographed all his books for me. My mother prepared ham and biscuits for his breakfast, and fried Summer Rambo apples. Jim asked for one of the fresh apples since he had never seen or tasted a Summer Rambo before. He planned to plant the seed. I do not know if the seeds made trees. I'll have to ask him.

We keep in touch by telephone and letter. I saw Jim a few weeks ago at the Cozy Corner Bookstore in Whitesburg, Kentucky. This gathering was to celebrate the 44th year of the publication of RIVER OF EARTH.
I hope you can use some of this.

Sincerely,

Bruce B. Brown

In 1970 Still resigned from his teaching position at MSU. He taught one semester at a branch of Ohio State University, at Portsmouth. He returned to teach the winter semester at Berea College. The following year Still embarked upon his first trip to Central America. He visited this first year in Yucatan and began a detailed study of the Mayan culture. As though some psychic change had evolved, both his inner and outer life were affected. The seventies began a revival of his literary publications: Way Down Yonder On Troublesome Creek (Putnam's 1974), The Wolfpen Rusties (Putnam's 1975), Pattern of a Man and Other Stories and Sporty Creek (Putnam's 1977), Jack and the Wonder Bean (Putnam's 1977).


In 1978 Hindman Settlement School paid him homage for his twenty-eight years of service, by naming the old library building after him. His home base is still the house on Dead Mare, although he spends a great amount of time traveling. His time away from Hindman is spent in accepting honors and awards bestowed upon him: The Weatherford Award from Berea College, The Milner Award, James
Still Festivals, James Still Fellowships (available at U.K.), honorary doctorates from Morehead State University, The University of Kentucky, and Transylvania, The Marjorie Peabody Waite Award. Three of his short stories were selected as "O Henry Memorial Prize Stories." His stories have been anthologized again and again. They have been used in two medical texts, The World of Psychoanalysis and The Creative Mind Dealing with Psychiatric Materials. James Still is still writing and who knows what the future may bring? But he is a perfectionist never sending anything out that is less than perfect. When asked about the writing process itself, James describes it as a natural act, for him that is:

I don't write anything until the wish to do it overtakes me and the emotion connected with it boils over. When I have done a thing it often seems that it pre-existed and had only to be discovered. The creative act involves the whole person. More even than he knows about himself, or could guess. The work of the great mental computer which has registered every mini-second of being from the moment of birth. Creativity involves the total experience, inherited characteristics, learning. The joys, the sorrows, the horrors.
Writing in itself is the act of becoming.14

In one of my weekly phone calls I asked him about the absence of sex and religion in his work and James replied: "I don't know enough about either thing to write about them." The sermon in River of Earth, from which the title is taken, is James Still's personal sermon. It is not an actual reference from the Bible. He stated that his first priority was living, and that he didn't believe in the notion that writing was a priority with writers. He added, "One must be living in order to write." When I remarked upon his unentangled lifestyle, he said that it was just an accident of living, that he had not been involved and made a mess for himself and someone else. I told him I didn't believe it was just an accident. I referred to one of his characters named Jiddy in The Scrape; I said, "Jiddy is the kind of man who would say that his lifestyle was only accidental." James laughed and said, "I am Jiddy, as I am all my characters." "I know that," I replied, "but you have lived those messy parts out in books and kept your life free from the kind of messes other artists have made." Finally he admitted, "I guess I shied away from the things I thought I might be sorry for later."15

I think James would agree that while the living is primary, the writing is the children he has nurtured. If one is married to the art of writing, those are demands enough on any lifestyle. The reticence of youth, the sensitivity of the artist has not hindered his ability to talk about his art. He is far enough removed from his work at this age to talk about the story of his life.

The following letter is from Dean Cadle, one of the most authoritative writers on James Still's work. I owe a debt to Mr. Cadle. Because of this letter I had to research more closely to find if there was the disparity between his work and life that Mr. Cadle speaks about:

30 Valle Vista Drive
Asheville, NC 28804
February 14, 1984

Rhonda England
Darwood Center
282 Town Mountain Road
Pikeville, KY 41051

Dear Ms. England:

Thank you for your letter about your work on James Still. I can appreciate your interest in his work and the problems you foresee.
I have already written about all I know about him and his work; so, there really isn't more I have that you could use.

I am curious as to why you are attempting to do what you call "a literary biography," since I have always assumed that a literary biography is a portrait of the man, the author, as found in his writings. And you won't find much biographical material about Still in his work.

Why don't you stick to a criticism of his works, and simply work in biographical material as background when it becomes appropriate? Trying to do both biography and criticism can end in a split personality, it seems to me, especially when dealing with Still.

I would suggest further: For biographical material, go directly to Still. I am certain he could suggest a few people in Hindman who know him well. And for help with criticism, read all that has been published on his work: in Appalachian Heritage; a thesis that a woman did at the University of Louisville a few years ago (who incidentally borrowed material from me but failed to give me credit); and the
Iron Mountain Review that will be out soon from Emory and Henry College. The only other piece I have done on his work that you may not have seen is a review in the Summer 1977 issue of Southwest Review. And there must be a lot of material in the Still collection at Morehead.

Best wishes. I feel certain you can do a good job.

Dean Cadle
Chapter III

A View of the Man and His Work: RIVER OF EARTH

On February 4, 1984, the Cozy Corner Bookstore in Whitesburg, Kentucky, held a birthday celebration for James Still's River of Earth. In 1978 the University Press of Kentucky came out with the third publication of River of Earth. By endurance alone, River of Earth has attained one of the cardinal rules of the classic. What are the ingredients of River of Earth that enabled the book to span the length of forty-four years? In book-jacket terminology, River of Earth is a chronicle of one family's survival in the hills of Appalachia during the Depression years. Narrated by Brack and Alpha Baldridge's seven year old son, River of Earth is a positive account of man's endurance season after season in the face of despair. In his foreword of the 1978 edition, Dean Cadle compares River of Earth to John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath published within a year of each other:

The major difference between them is that Steinbeck's story deals with a calamity that has struck America only once in its lifetime, while Still is writing of the struggles that have plagued the mountain people since the country was settled. 16

The authenticity of River of Earth is not limited to a specific time or area. It is the country of poverty and desperation, conflicts of the heart and whims of nature that James Still is writing about.

In order to grasp the totality of James Still the man, we must view him from the work that has sprung forth from his heart and mind. For as Eudora Welty has said we cannot take every word the writer writes as autobiographical, but the frame of the story in the final analysis must reflect the frame of the author's mind. In an interview with Appalachian Journal, 1979, James Still recalls his frame of mind during the actual writing:

I did have an early awareness that at least in my area something was there that would not last much longer. The poems in Hounds on the Mountain (1937) will verify the recognition at that period. We were living in the nineteenth century, so to speak, and the twentieth would not long be denied. The American chestnut was beginning to die on the mountains from a blight that could not be detected with the naked eye, and a blight equally as invisible was at work on folk culture as it then existed. I remember beginning it in the old Hindman School building on a Saturday

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afternoon. I don't know what I thought I was up to, but I haven't forgotten the moment when the characters began to live and talk to me.18

River of Earth is a regional writing in that its setting is clearly defined, as any story must be, but the characters and their struggle could be placed anywhere in any time. It is regional with the same merit that Flannery O'Connor defines the term:

> The best American fiction has always been regional. The ascendency passed roughly from New England to the Midwest to the South; it has passed and stayed longest wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of alikeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light.19

Elizabeth Madox Roberts, author of Time of Man, was one of James Still's friends. Their work has been referred to as being in the same school of literary thought. Still recalls the comments she made after reading River of Earth:

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Elizabeth Madox Roberts said to me after reading the book that I had accomplished the two most difficult things in writing fiction. One, writing a novel in the first person; second, to write from the point of view of a child.20

Critics in dissecting a piece of art often conjecture about the tools or devices of the artist within a given work. Some have arrived at the idea that Still used a seven year old in order to omit any kind of sentimentality within the novel. But it's difficult to imagine an artist plotting and working out these maneuvers when in the process of any creative act. Whatever the author did, however he managed to write, the final work as a whole will never be fully grasped either by the author or for those of us who read it. The critical reader can merely relate what is definitely written as fact and hypothesize upon the sensations and meaning the book has held for him.

River of Earth opens in March, the beginning of Spring, and closes in March. Many critics have dealt with the first chapter; some have labeled it humorous or tragi-comic but for the discerning nature there is nothing funny about the kind of conflict or desperation written about in these lines.

Brack Baldridge and his family have been living on a hillside farm above the mine-camp of Blackjack. The mine is closed and the family has used up their garden supply due to the arrival of Brack's cousins Harl and Tibb. Harl and Tibb are presented as lazy selfish oafs that keep hanging on, taking food the family desperately needs. Mrs. Baldridge tries several tactics in order to secure food for her children. She tries to feed them between meals, even eating less herself. She pleads for her husband to dismiss them, but his sense of family loyalty will not permit this act. "My folks eat when we eat," he said, "and as long as we eat." The ultimate insult arrives with Uncle Samp who comes for a weekend and continues to stay on. Mrs. Baldridge in desperation seizes a time alone with her children to move their belongings out to a tiny smokehouse and sets fire to the house. She releases her husband from his responsibility by saying, "A big house draws kinfolks like a horse draws nitflies."21

In an interview with Appalachian Journal (1979), the interviewer commented upon this chapter as wildly comic, yet terrifically poignant. Mr. Still replied with: "The necessity was such she had to take this step. A force put, as we say. I miss the humor in this particular act. I don't see it as humor."23

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22 Still, River of Earth, p. 7.
The edge of desperation is never humorous. In India a mother has chopped off her child's hand in order for him to beg. She too must choose the lesser of the two evils: to let him starve to death or mutilate him in order for him to beg. When one's life is centered on basic survival, the drastic act becomes simple.

Simplicity is a major element of any great work of art. And it is an attitude that must be inherent in the author's mind. How the artist arrived at simplicity or whether he possesses it from birth cannot be discerned. It is conceivable that simplicity can be learned. But the desperation of the artistic urge is what singles the artist out from all the rest. It is quite possible that Art is conceived by desperation and realized through passion.

Desperation cleans the field of thought, erasing all small emotions. One must remember that desperation is a much broader, much larger thing than fear. Fear is defined as a basic sense, so that we know it is instinctual and physical. Desperation is without hope; it is from the intellect. Fear stops us in our tracks; desperation urges us to act. William Faulkner in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, speaks of the outcome of fear and its effect on modern literature:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question:
When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat. He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and teach himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed - love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.  

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The outcome of desperation is quite often violent, as seen in Still's work. Southern Literature as a whole has often been interpreted as violent. It is the kind of violence produced by desperation, but not for sensation as used in some modern writing. Perhaps the hardships of the region or location creates the desperation in a lifestyle. Flannery O'Connor states the obvious reason for the violence and grotesque found in southern writing:

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize a freak; you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological.²⁵

Perhaps the reason for some readers to view the desperate acts in Still's writing as comic is that the simple solutions to desperate situations can sometimes appear grotesque. The characters have an attitude that can be defined as stoic. After Alpha Baldridge set fire to the house, three alarm shots sound in the valley below, but when the help arrives, it is too late:

When they arrived, the walls had fallen in, and mother stood among the scattered furnishings, her face calm and triumphant. 26

There is little room for sentiment in survival, but to the compassionate heart there is always the conflict of the ways and means involved in the act. The question of life feeding off life has been handled throughout literature. Marie Noel in Notes for Myself, presents a theological question or argument with God:

I muse on the Bacillus of Koch and its kind, as much creatures of God, as much marvels of God as Man and Angel. The Bacillus gnaws away the breast of a young mother, the throat of an apostle, and proclaims: "God is good." And because it has received from Providence its nourishment, its subsistence, and benediction of its posterity, the Bacillus gives "thanks." The same "thanks" we return at the end of a meal after eating chicken or lamb. 27

Mr. Still handles this conflict in two distinct ways within the novel. But it is presented as a fact or a part of survival. It is done in order to survive, yet the conflict is still present.

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26 James Still, River of Earth, p. 11.

Near starvation that spring, father and son go into the woods to secure meat for the table. But the boy's heart is filled with pity and anger of the situation:

With spring upon the hills, it was strange to go out and kill in the new-budded wood. The squirrels move sluggishly, carrying their young. Rabbits huddled in the sedge clumps, swollen and stupid. 28

At the same time there is an intimation of Euly's own womanhood and what she has done in the act of surviving:

Once father brought home a rusty-eared rabbit, setting Euly to clean it. When she came on four little ones in its warm belly, she cried out in fear of what she had done, flung the bloody knife into the dirt, and ran away into the low pasture. She stayed there all day crying in the stubble, and never ate wild meat again. 29

In the next instance the boy is in combat with a spider. The family has been confined to the little smokehouse due to the summer rains and the boy is playing on the floor:

28 James Still, River of Earth, p. 13.
29 Still, River of Earth, p. 13.
I licked flakes of salt off the meat box with my tongue. An ant marched up and down, feeling along the boards, and I saw four grand-daddy spiders. Three were tight in a corner, their pill bodies hung in a web of legs. A fourth walked alone. I took up a shoe and slapped the proud walker, and he went down, crushed upon the floor. He lay quivering in a puzzle of legs and body. As I watched, he rose up, moving into a cranny. I crawled away from the meat box, not wanting to see again the gray spot where he bled.  

This ultimate compassion for all living things is witnessed in Mr. Still's personal life by a view of his garden on Dead Mare Branch:

I tell visitors, "Don't let the grass and weeds give you an idea I'm lazy. (My mother never ironed my shirttails because superstition had it I would grow up indolent. It didn't help. My laziness consists of not doing what other people think I should be doing.) If green grow the rushes-0, they

30 Still, River of Earth, p. 47.
serve a purpose. Where else would the rabbits, blacksnakes, ground squirrels, and terrapins live as my neighbors, much less the fowls of the air. 31

Deprivation is important to desire. To acquire too much of anything can be asbad as not having enough. To desire is to hope, wish, imagine and of these ingredients are memories made. Over-abundance (to the uneducated senses) can create boredom, frustration, and lack of imagination. Mr. Still's characters know what it means to be hungry to the point of starvation. And their joy at fulfillment is realistic.

After nearly starving all summer long, Brack Baldridge goes into Blackjack, hires on at the mine and returns with his arms full of groceries. The boy's elation is first viewed by his mother's reactions:

A lean hand reached toward the table, blue-veined and bony. It was Mother's touching the sugar-jar, the red-haired meat, the flour sack. Suddenly she threw an apron over her head, turning away from us. She hardly made a sound, no more than a tick-beetle. 32

31 "An Interview with James Still," Appalachian Journal, p. 27.
32 James Still, River of Earth, p. 70.
The energy that anticipation brings the human being is a wonderful thing. To be able to look forward to something hastens time, gives strength, and renews the entire human spirit:

Father lighted a fire in the stove. I fetched three buckets of water from the spring, not feeling the weary pull of the hill, not resting between buckets. The knobby heads of the guineas stuck above the weeds, potter-racking. The smell of frying meat grew upon the air, growing until it was larger than the house, or the body of any hunger.  

In 1979 James Still was interviewed by Appalachian Journal and he spoke about his work with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for three months during a summer in the mid 1930's. He says that this was part of the inspiration and information that led to the writing of River of Earth:

I visited homes over this wide area on foot, (Knott County, the creeks of Montgomery, Ball, Mill, Lower Troublesome, and Lower Quicksand), and sometimes to the more distant places on a hired plowhorse. (That devil of a horse has a story of her own). I visited homes by invitation  

33 James Still, River of Earth, p. 70.
only. Families were required to make a formal request. At their houses I counted livestock, estimated the number of eggs laid a day, the measure of milk the cow gave. I inspected meal barrels, flour, and lard gourd or buckets, tallied mason jars of canned fruit and vegetables, the kitchen garden’s promise, the acres of corn in cultivation, the kitchen garden’s promise. I glanced inside the houses, noted the clothes on their owner’s backs and on their clotheslines. I learned that utter poverty has an odor. Soap seems to be the first sacrifice of the needy. I pencilled notes in a school copybook. These copy-books—raw-data—are now at Morehead State University (James Still Room). They furnished some of the background for the novel.\footnote{Appalachian Journal, p. 128.}

It is difficult to dissect a piece of art and at the same time convey the magnitude of the whole. It is more difficult still when the work is as rich and subtle as River of Earth. River of Earth has no point of reference. It is truly a world created entirely within the total context of itself and its characters. Herein lies its beauty and its truth. Oscar Wilde defined art as, "Truth in
art is the unity of a thing with itself."\textsuperscript{35} This is a rarity in great Literature the world over. Dean Cadle, one of James Still's most avid critics has a firm grasp on the nature of Mr. Still's work:

When Still's themes are enumerated outside his writings they seem as blatant as trumpet blasts, but when their almost unobtrusive weavings are traced through his stories they are no louder than the simple, traditional affirmations that have always plagued and honored mankind: concern with love, loyalty, hunger, death, and with the reactions of the individual when he is cornered, when he reaches the breaking point, either by force or choice. Reworded, they mean the will to endure, self-preservation. \textsuperscript{36}  

Uncle Jolly, a major character in \textit{River of Earth} epitomizes the theme of hope and endurance. Just when despair threatens to become too extensive, Uncle Jolly makes an entrance and shifts the mood to hope. This shows the acute sense of timing of the author. Jolly lives with his mother (Grandma Middleton). He is her last


child, a brother to Alpha Baldridge. When he comes for a visit to the hillside farm, Brack announces his arrival as, "Yonder comes a born fool." 37 Jolly is thrown in jail for dynamiting a neighbor's dam, but he sets fire to the jail and is then released for staying to put it out.

The boy (narrator) is sent to stay on the farm with Grandma Middleton while Uncle Jolly is imprisoned for the winter. And during his stay we sense the security of the farm and Uncle Jolly and Grandma's lifestyle in contrast to the Baldridge's. The child sees it as nourishment and plenty:

Field mice fattened in the patches. Heavy orange cups of the trumpet vine bloomed on the cornstalks, and field larks blew dustily from row to row, feeding well where the mice had scattered their greedy harvesting. 38

That the seasons and nature act as characters in James Still's writing is evident in paragraphs like this:

During the short winter days the sun was feeble, and pale, shining without heat.
Frost lay thick in the mornings, and crusts of hard earth rose in the night on little toadstools of ice. 39

37 James Still, River of Earth, p. 33.
38 James Still, River of Earth, p. 101.
"There were days when grandma was too sick to rise."

There is hardly a distinction between the elements and the characters. Dean Cadle says that "Still's secret is in his ability to use the language so that it performs the functions of both music and the painter's pigments. His words can create a picture filled with the brilliance of an impressionist painting." Still says that the problem with most writing is that the writers construct barriers between the reader and the story. "The reader has enough trouble without the author muddying the water." Still says, "The most perfect story would be like a copper wire stretched from a generator to a light bulb." That he has striven for communication and with the knowledge that it is the most direct one, James Still surely has achieved his purpose in passages like this one:

January was a bell in Lean Neck Valley. The ring of an ax was a mile wide, and all passage over the spewed-up earth was lifted on frosty air and sounded against fields of ice. Icicles

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40 Dean Cadle, "Man on Troublesome Creek," Yale Review, p. 246.
41 Dean Cadle, "Man on Troublesome Creek," Yale Review, p. 246.
42 Cadle, p. 52.
as large as a man's body hung from limestone cliffs. 43

As Uncle Jolly represents the emotion of hope, Walking John Gay is representative of the theme of uprootedness that runs throughout the book. In reference to their having to move again from the hillside to the mine camp, Alpha Baldridge reminisces about him to her children:

I saw Walking John Gay once when I was a child,
Walking John Gay traipsing and trafficking,
looking the world over. Walked all the days of
his life; seen more of creation than any living
creature. A lifetime of going and he's got
nowhere found no peace. 44

This uprootedness is expressed again by Brother Sim Mobberly, the same sermon from which the title of the book is taken:

Oh, my children, where air we going on this
mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting,
and a-dying the living and the dead riding
the waters? Where air it sweeping us? 45

43 James Still, River of Earth, p. 110.
44 James Still, River of Earth, p. 52.
45 James Still, River of Earth, p. 76.
The theme is mentioned again by Uncle Jolly, the most stable character in the novel:

Looky here, John Walkabout, where air ye forever going? What air ye expecting to see you've never saw yet? Hain't the head o' one holler pine-blank like the next 'un?46

The theme of uprootedness is related by three different characters. Mrs. Baldridge whose greatest desire is to settle in a "lone place" and not be forever moving around desires the security. Brother Sim Mobberly the preacher relates it to the condition of the world and in reference to a life hereafter. But Uncle Jolly, the most stable of all the characters is perplexed by John Gay more than any. His answer holds the simple but sophisticated idea expressed by G. K. Chesterton who, when metaphorically speaking of self-discovery, defines two ways of getting home:

There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk around the whole world till we come back to the same place.47

46 James Still, River of Earth, pp. 139-140.
The conflict of Brack Baldridge's desire to follow the mine and Alpha's desire for the "lone place" is one of those unsolvable conflicts that continues throughout the book. Alpha hears Brother Sim's message relating to her own heart:

Mother was on the rag edge of crying. "Forever moving yon and back, setting down nowhere for good and all, searching for God knows what, she said. "Where are we expecting to draw up to?" Her eyes dampened. "Forever I've wanted to set us down in a lone spot, a place certain and enduring, with room to swing arm and elbow, a garden piece for fresh vituals, and a cow to furnish milk for the baby."\(^{48}\)

It is conceivable that the two urges could be present within one individual or that in reality the two are not separate urges at all. Obviously this could not be the knowledge of a seven year old. The manner in which the author presents the conflict arises from the knowledge inherent in his own mind. There is no judgement on either conflict; each is given the equality of his desire, until the wandering of John Gay and the wishing of Alpha become as one thought. What has often appeared as a duality in Still's personality has perhaps been an inward recognition related to this.

\(^{48}\) James Still, River of Earth, p. 51.
Still has chosen to live in a "lone spot" in a remote part of the country. He has been called a hermit by some, although he denies this image, saying that he travels a great deal of the time and sees many visitors. But traveling in foreign countries where not even the language is your own is most definitely being alone. There are some orders of priesthood that would allow their priests to travel in the same lifestyle as Still. Hasn't he in essence followed the advice of Rilke written in *Letters to a Young Poet*?

There is but one solitude, and that is big, and not easy to bear, and to almost everybody come hours when he would gladly exchange it for any sort of sociability, however banal and cheap, for the semblance of a trivial conformity with the next-best, with the unworthiest. But perhaps those are the very hours when solitude grows; for its growing is painful as the growing of boys and sad as the beginning of spring, but that must not mislead you. The necessary thing is after all but this: solitude, great inner solitude. Going into oneself and for hours meeting no one -- this one must be able to attain.

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To go or to stay, becoming in essence the same thing, or as Still would say it is the irony of the thing. When someone told him that his fiction was a cross between comedy and the highest tragedy, Still responded by saying, "That's the pure definition of irony." The interviewer said, "Is that basically the way you see your work?" Still answered, "It may be the way I see the world. It is not done with purpose or forethought. Isn't that the way life is? My life anyhow?"  

Mother Teresa during a meeting with Billy Graham, astonished everyone by commenting upon the utter poverty in America, alluding of course to our poverty of spirit. For, historically, it has been true that the more affluent the society, the lower the morality, the more impoverished the spirit. People living at the edge of desperation and starvation sometimes elicit more charity, more independence and unearthly pride. 

In River of Earth, pride is a major element in the personality of the characters. When the children go to school for the first time, they are elated, but here among their peer group is the first recognition of pride:

Euly and I ate out of a shoe box at noon.

We laughed when it was opened, amazed at what was there. Fried guinea thighs and wings,

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50 James Still, River of Earth, p. 86.
covered with a brown-meal crust. Two yellow tomatoes. A corn pone, and a thumb-sized lump of salt. "Mommy must o' killed the guinea before daylight," I said. "I never heard a peep." We had turned our backs on the others before looking into the box, but now we were not ashamed of what we had to eat.\footnote{James Still, \textit{River of Earth}, p. 86.}

With Mrs. Baldridge it is more visible and not as heart-rending as it is with the children. The family near starvation are getting ready to go back to the mine camp again when one of the camp gossips Nezzie Crouch is curious enough to walk three miles through the mud in order to spread the news through the camps:

"There's a tale going round that you folks are nigh starved up here. I see you've got a far garden patch. Not a grain of faith I put in such talk," says Nezzie.

Mother's hands worked busily over a potato, the skin lifting paper-thin, wasting none of flesh. "We've got plenty," she said. "A God's
plenty," Her voice was as sharp as the
bright blade of the knife. 52

Still recalls these instances in speaking of the pride and
independence in the mountain mind:

To live in that time and place as I think I've
said earlier was to be politically aware. What
at first could be taken care of by an occasional
truck load of Red Cross flour grew worse as the
Depression ran its course. And even that had
its comic moments. There is something in my
nature which welcomes that incongruity. Say,
the arrival of the first shipment of grapefruit.
Having never seen grapefruit, and finding
them sour, many threw them away -- some whose
very faces bespoke malnutrition. One man told
me, "Somebody did tell us to put sugar on them
and they'd be good eating, but we didn't have
sugar. My younguns used the grapefruits for
baseballs till they busted." I learned there
was a general -- of course -- not total --
prejudice against yellow cornmeal. Even the
color of the beans made a difference. Cheese

52 James Still, River of Earth, p. 56.
was uncommon, so the five pound loaves were often made into soap or fed to the hogs. So went the powdered milk and eggs at a later date.

Bureaucrats in the Department of Agriculture didn't bother to investigate local dietary habits. A neighbor said, "What they know up there in Washington wouldn't cover a gnat's ass." A salient fact came clear to me: Even the grossly undernourished will not eat just anything. There's your independent mountaineer at his most independent. Pride is involved as well as custom and habit. 53

Along with an unearthly pride and independence is also a more realistic acceptance of death. That acceptance is more readily found with people who live more closely to the soil. Brack Baldridge makes it a very simple matter by relating it to the nature of animals:

That's their born nature, Father said. Guineas are hard raising. Bounden to lose some. It's the same with folks. Hain't everybody lives to rattle their bones. Hain't everybody breathes till their veins get blue as dogtick stalks. 54

53 An Interview with James Still, Appalachian Journal, p. 129.
54 James Still, River of Earth, p. 169.
Mourning or grief is a luxury for those who can afford the time. When life is one long battle to survive, the details of every added grief must slip out of view and most often it is true that the hurt that runs the deepest elicits no trivial tears:

The mines at Blackjack had closed again and Father had rented a farm that spring on the hills rising from the mouth of Flaxpatch on Little Angus. We moved there during a March freeze, and the baby died that week of croup.

There follows a narration of work involved in the planting and tending of the crop. Each and every waking moment there is work to be done. And then with the crop on its way there is time for grief:

There was nothing more to do in the garden and fields, and during this first rest since spring Mother began to grieve over the baby. Euly told us that she cried in the night. We spoke quietly. There was no noise in the house. The bottle-flies on the windows and katydids outside sang above our speaking.

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In the final chapter, Uncle Jolly arrives with Grandma Middleton's body (in her coffin) in the back of his wagon. He has brought her to Alpha's because Alpha is heavy with child and cannot travel. All through the night the boy tries desperately to say something to Grandma but in the end he asks the same question of the uprootedness theme throughout the book, "Grandma, where have you gone?"\(^5\)

With an affirmation that life goes on, the theme of death through rebirth is a closing sentence of the book. Alpha had delivered her fifth child during the night and, "A baby was crying in the far room."\(^5\)

*River of Earth* is a realistic chronicle of one family's life. Poverty, uprootedness, and desperation are the enemies they must battle and survive. Years later James recalls their struggle as being very sad:

"What I've read of the book, I've found sad. It didn't seem so years ago. It's their denial of self-pity that strikes me, raises them up. It's because of their future. I know the bleakness, the hopelessness."\(^5\)

\(^5\) James Still, *River of Earth*, p. 245.

\(^5\) James Still, *River of Earth*, p. 245.

\(^5\) Appalachian Journal, p. 140.
Chapter IV
Biographical Elements in Two Short Stories

In an interview with Appalachian Journal (1979) James Still defines creativity:

Creativity involves the total experience, inherited characteristics, learning. The joys, the sorrows, the horrors. (Three nights ago I stood by a boy prostrate on a truck seat with crushed lungs and tried to keep up his will to live by giving a running account of what the rescue squad was doing with the other bloodied victims of the wreck. Once I was following a man who was shot dead in my face. I've witnessed several people killed. At age 13 I was in a house that was lifted by a tornado and the top floor blown away. March 28, 1977, I was trapped on a street in San Salvador (El Salvador) during an uprising for hours during which more than one hundred people were killed, hundreds wounded, and no escape from the scene possible. I was in World War II in Africa. I've had many traumatic experiences.
How does the creative mind assimilate such data?  

"How does the creative mind assimilate such data?" This is one of those questions that has plagued both the writer and the critic for centuries. When I asked James Still about the biographical material in his works, his answer was, "Of course the work is biographical, just like River of Earth happened to me," then he laughed and said, "but my Mother never burned down the house." "Everything the writer writes is biographical, in that some fundamental part of the whole triggers the story."

Once the artist has written the story it takes on its own personality in such a manner that it is difficult to remember the actual event. In "The Nest" James recalls the actual event that triggered the story.

The short story "The Nest" was published in 1948. James says this story was inspired by an actual account. One of the teachers at Hindman Settlement School had a little girl who wandered into the mountains behind the school. The child was found after a long hard night of searching and she was nearly frozen to death.

Unlike Nezzie Hargis in "The Nest" the child did not die. Soon after the first publication of "The Nest" a lady wrote James telling

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61 Interview with James Still, April 15, 1984.
him she had not been able to sleep since she read it. James answered her letter, telling her that he had been unable to sleep until he wrote it. 62

Nezzie Hargis lives with her father and Mam, the lady Nezzie refers to as, "the woman Father brought to live with them since mother had gone away." Mam does not like Nezzie. She is always scolding her and making her tend to the chickens. Nezzie loves her little half-brother but Mam will not let her fondle him:

She recollected once kissing the baby, her lips against its mouth, its bright face puckered. Mam had scolded, "Don't paw the child. It's unhealthy. (sic) 63

Nezzie is sent over the mountain to stay with her Uncle Barlow and Aunt Clissa. Her grandfather is ill and Mam and Father are taking the baby with them to spend the night.

As Nezzie climbs the mountain and the wind blows colder and colder, it is her recollections that keep her moving. She thinks about the new diddles and the warmth of the brooder house, (sic). As it begins to get dark Nezzie thinks about turning around and going back to the brooder house to spend the night with the new diddles. She sits down behind a fence post. She remembers her

grandfather, and with the thought of him and his age, she thinks about the baby and how it, too, will have to grow old.

And seeing her grandfather she thought of his years, and she thought suddenly of the baby growing old, time perishing its cheeks, hands withering and palsying. The hateful wisdom caught at her heart and choked her throat.  

As she drifts toward sleep another distant memory awakens her:

She roved in vision, beyond her father, beyond the baby, to one whose countenance was seen as through a mist. It was her mother's face, cherished -- she who had held her in the warm safe nest of her arms. Nezzie slept at last, laboring in sleep toward waking.

Nezzie sleeps through the night the snow making a blanket over her. She awakes the next morning to the sound of an ax in the trees:

Nezzie came down the slope, She lost a shoe and walked hippity-hop, one shoe on, one shoe off. The pasture was as feathery as a pillow. A bush plucked her bonnet, snatching it away;

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64 James Still, "The Nest," p. 50.
the bush wore the bonnet on a limb. Nezzie laughed. She was laughing when the cows climbed by, heads wreathed in a fog of breath, and when a fox horn blew afar. Her drowsiness increased. It grew until it could no longer be borne. She parted a clump of broomsedge and crept inside. She clasped her knees, rounding the grass with her body.

It was like a rabbit's bed. It was a nest. 66

Just when it would seem most suitable for the child to die during the night, Still permits her to live until morning. Just at the moment when help seems imminent, Nezzie gives up. It is as though she has survived the long cold night to prove her equality to her surroundings, so much so, that she sheds the human element for that of nature. She moves down the hill like a rabbit "hippity-hop" and the tree wears her bonnet. The nest mentioned earlier, "the nest of her mother's arms," could be the nest Nezzie is now choosing.

If there are other biographical data within the frame of "The Nest," Still did not say. But it is interesting to note the parallels in his own life. James did have a stepmother that he seemed reticent to speak about, and a half-brother, Don. Another interesting element in this particular story is that it is

written from a feminine viewpoint. This is the only story that I have found in his collected works written from this point of view. The major portion of his work is written from the viewpoint of the child, or from the adult and masculine point of view.

In "The Scrape," James did not relate any specific account from an actual event in his life. He did talk about the fatalism inherent in the mountain people. When I asked him if he views death as a choice, he hesitated, then said, "Death chooses you." Since all of his accounts of death seem to have this element, one wonders if an artist could write so strongly for so many years without embracing it himself. When I asked Still if there was an actual account of "The Scrape" he said, "There have been many such accounts in the mountains, and elsewhere." When I questioned him further, he said the possible inspiration or triggering of the story was based on his own questioning of the instinctual element and the acceptance of death in the view of fatalism. I selected this particular story because it was his first published story. It is an excellent description of fatalism. Three elements within this story seem to surface repeatedly in his other work, the elements of choice, equality and instinct. Due to these elements in his tragedies or would-be horrors, the stories are softened. I told him he killed his characters very gently. Still views death with the same acceptance as his characters. 67

67 Personal interview with James Still, 15 April 1984.
First published as "On Defeated Creek," "The Scrape" involves a fight to the death between two men, Cletis Wilhoyt and Jiddy Thornwell. Both men are in love with Posey Houndshell. Typical of Still's other works, the narrator remains unnamed. On this particular night the narrator is going to a square dance at Enoch Lovern's place when he comes upon Jiddy Thornwell lying stretched across the road. The narrator stops to wake him and as a consequence is caught in Jiddy's trap. For now he has to stay and serve as referee to Jiddy and Cletis' fight.

Jiddy and Cletis are described as "Fellows who don't care whether it snows oats or rains tomcats, they're dangerous to be around." The narrator tries to get Jiddy drunk so he will forget to meet with Cletis for the fight.

In order to understand why or how two people could choose to commit such an act, Still has placed the story in the realm of the instinctual or sensual. Even though we read a horrifying account of a bloody fight to the death, we are not in the end horrified. His artistry in using metaphorical allusions allows us to enjoy the story without an assault on our senses.

In the opening paragraph, we are placed within the realm of nature by the narrator's reference to the mating of foxes:

I was walking up Ballard Creek and reckoning to myself that foxes were abroad and sparking on such a night when I happened upon Jiddy.
Thornwell sprawled in the road at the mouth of Sporty Hollow.  

Jiddy is described by the narrator as fractious and easily riled, "just too mean to live." Following out a scheme to get Jiddy drunk, the narrator leads him to a still for some corn liquor. The liquor is so bad the narrator cannot drink it but Jiddy emptied a whole dipper, then peed in the vat. The narrator excuses Jiddy's action saying "you couldn't nasty it worse than it already was."

Even though they find some liquor of better quality, and Jiddy drinks a great amount, he is not to be swayed from his fight with Cletis.

When the moon rose high in the sky, Cletis met with them under the trees. The narrator is torn with indecision:

There I was between hell and a flint stone.  
Come a thousand years I couldn't have changed their minds. Their heads were as hard as ballpeen hammers. And this was to be no fair fist scrape either, no mere knock down combat, with the one who hollered "gate post" first the loser. There would be no pausing, no blow counted foul. Win or perish, endure or die.

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Here are two equals who have made a deliberate choice to live or die. How is a thinking person to understand such an act? These are the questions that the narrator states while he watches the two men.

And gosh dog! They weren't even mad. They talked chin to chin, plotting the battle, cool as moss.

The two men give their weapons (pistols) to the referee. They order him to tie their left hands together with a piece of wire. There is an erotic element mixed in the stance of "chin to chin" as though the two are wedded together for better or worse.

Then following the rule of all ceremony, they ask the referee to treat them to a drink of corn liquor. They order the referee to stand far back from the fight. The two men proceed to fish in their pockets with their right hands for their knives, which they open with their teeth. From a distance in the dark the narrator then describes the fight:

Cletis struck first, as I recall, swinging outward, elbow angling, and had there been a wind the blade would have whistled. I heard a rip like an ax cleaving the limb of a tree. I froze, and I couldn't have moved had the hills come toppling.

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The span of Jiddy's back hindered my view, and I couldn't swear for certain, but I figured Cletis' knife had split him wide. Yet Jiddy only grunted and plunged his blade as if to sever the key-notch of an oak. Cletis rocked and gurgled. Cletis gurgled like water squiggling in the ground during the rainy weather. They kept to their feet, backing and filing, breathing as heavily as Muldraugh's bull had, arms rising and striking. And they kept on striking.

This tearing apart of flesh and bone is related in metaphors so that the bodies are like two bodies in nature, trees and water and Mauldraugh's bull. Even the narrator is sheltered somewhat due to the stance of the two men. The author leaves us with this much mystery. He does not wish to overwhelm us with complete details. When the narrator describes the ongoing fight, he compares them to animals:

I've seen rams butt skull till it thundered.
I've witnessed caged wildcats tear hide. Neither was a scrimption to this.

The narrator then sprawls upon the ground begging and pleading with them to quit:

After a spell I quieted. I cracked my lids and peeped out. Jiddy and Cletis were lying alongside each other in the road, laying as stiff as logs. At night red is black, and there was black over and around them. They lay in a gore of black. 73

We have witnessed a very brutal slaying of two men and we feel the reality of such an event. But the artistry of James Still is in this paragraph: not even the word "blood" is mentioned. So much a part of the elements of nature these two men are shown to be that we merely see sap where "two logs" have been hewn down. As the narrator leaves the scene he begins to cheer:

I didn't run any more. I walked, as I walked, I calmed. What was done was done. Predestination church folks call it. I footed along peart, thinking of what Jiddy had said once about wanting to be buried in a chestnut coffin so he could go through hell a-popping, and I thought about Posey Houndshell. Nobody stood between me and her. 74

"The Scrape" could be a brutal account. The genius of James Still resides in his ability to know the difference between life and fiction. It is this subtle difference that makes art. The combination of choice, equality, and nature allows us to view James Still's attitude towards death as a natural act of the circumstance. It is never a horror of death that James Still writes about. His view is that death is something natural. His view of death is not disparate from his view of life. His sense of timing is akin to his astonishment by the timing of outer events that have affected his daily life. He related many instances or moments where he pondered the sense of timing in the cosmos. Whether it is fate or destiny or merely his own observations, the specifics seem to be still undecided. He senses a mystery to life that most fail to notice. This gives him a sense of unity that is akin to that of Marie Noel when she describes life and death and good and evil:

Good and evil like life and death are not, as I so long believed, two irreconcilable adversaries ... two hostile principles, two parallel powers that will never meet. ---
There is between them only a continuance with inconceivable limits.\(^75\)

Chapter V

Prospects and Conclusion

In concluding this biographical sketch I realize the many possible themes one could research concerning the life of James Still. His early and middle childhood in Alabama, and his adventures on the road, would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor. His college years, the people, and early influences in his life and literary career, merit fuller study. Even the work he did for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the 1930's could be a thesis from the sociological and historical view as well as informative about James Still. He kept notebooks during that time, and they are now open to the public in the "James Still Room," Camden Carroll Library. The major portion of his literary years were spent in the vicinity of Hindman. So, Hindman Settlement School and the Hindman community itself could possibly be one of the richest sources on James Still the man. His summer visits to Yaddo, Breadloaf, and McDowell Colony would make a very interesting work. Who were the artists that he met in these places? We know that he first met Katherine Ann Porter at Yaddo. Who were the others? What influence did they have upon his life? In time the letters from Katherine Ann Porter and Elizabeth Madox Roberts will be made available to scholars. What was he like when he taught at Morehead State University? What were the student's reaction to him?
These are some of the themes that could be pursued on James Still's life. There is the body of his work about which no one has written any significant interpretation. Dean Cadle, Fred Chappell, and others have written some very good articles, but as of this time nothing in-depth has been done. The ten winters he sojourned in Central America would make a fascinating study of James Still's need for privacy and "pure" culture. There is a wealth of material that could be gathered about this artist. A definitive biography is needed but one would need to travel and have the advantage of unlimited time.

There is an enigmatic quality in James Still that is present in all great artists. This mystery is part of the greatness in his work. At one point in my work he loomed larger than life size. Yet at the same time he seemed so elusive that I could not write anything down about him. In order to free myself from this paralysis, I recalled what I envision as the essence of being: I have always felt when someone does something long enough and with great passion he in actuality becomes the thing: the nun becomes a prayer, the poet a poem... Although there is no apparent quarrel with the Creator in the work of James Still, there must be an unconscious battle in his mind. He is not satisfied with the way things are, so he recreates, or else he strives to see things in the way they really are.

In the course of our interviews Still informed me that if an in-depth biography was to be done, he would do it. I do not
believe he has any intentions of doing one, however. This is just another way of Still's insisting on his privacy. I have respected his desire for privacy. His insistence that his work is his life is something anyone would honor. From the jumbled mass of information I have drawn a map for other travelers along the way. A definitive biography would not alter his work in any way. It would only add more to a man that has never been ordinary in any way.

His wealth of life gives him the personality that the apostle Paul speaks about, when he said "be all things to all people." Still is a peasant with the farmer, a man of worldly wisdom with the sophisticate, a teacher, and a good neighbor to those who live around him. He has given a great portion of his life to helping others. He says of his writing that, "Some things a man does just for himself." He has not been a prolific writer, preferring quality to quantity. This has made my work with him an exciting venture, one that I hope will inspire further interest in the man and his work.

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**Additional Sources**

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