



# Shelby Foote: A Writer's Life

*C. Stuart Chapman*

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For a biographer Shelby Foote is a famously reluctant subject. In writing this biography, however, C. Stuart Chapman gained valuable access through interviews and shared correspondence, an advantage Foote rarely has granted to others.

Born into Mississippi Delta gentry in 1916, Foote has engaged in a lifelong struggle with the realities behind his persona, the classic image of the southern gentleman. His polished civil graces mask a conflict deep within. Foote's beloved South is a changing region, and even progressive change, of which Foote approves, can be unsettling. In letters and interviews, and in his writings, he often waxes nostalgic as he grapples to recover the grace of an earlier time, particularly the era of the Civil War. Indeed, Chapman reveals that the whole of Foote's novels and historical narratives serves as a refuge from deeply ambiguous feelings. As Foote has struggled to understand the radical shifts brought to his native land by modernization and the region's integration into the nation, his personal history has been clouded by ideological conflict.

This biography shows him pining for aristocratic, antebellum culture while rejecting the practices that made possible the injustices of that era. Privately and vehemently, Foote opposed George C. Wallace's and Ross Barnett's untenable segregationist stance. Yet publicly during the 1960s and '70s he skirted the explosive race issue.

Foote is best known for his dazzling and definitive *The Civil War: A Narrative*. Written from 1954 to 1974, the three-volume opus was published during years when the South exploded with racial and political tensions and was forever changed. This biography recognizes that nowhere are Foote's personal conflicts, ambivalence, and outright contradictions more on display than in his fiction. Although *Love in a Dry Season*, *Jordan County*, and *September, September* are set in the contemporary South, they reach no firm social resolutions. Instead they entertain, dramatize, and come to grips with the social, gender, and racial barriers of the southern life he experienced.

While showing how Foote's guarded embrace of the South's past and present characterizes his identity as a thinker, a historian, and a writer of fiction, Chapman discloses Foote's reluctance to address burning contemporary issues and his veiled desire to recall more gracious times.

C. Stuart Chapman is a Massachusetts State House aide living in Jamaica Plain. His work has been published in the *Clarksdale Press-Register*, *Memphis Business Journal*, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, *Jamaica Plain Gazette*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and other publications.

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